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Editor Isaac Williams
Art Director Xavier Robleda
Editorial Director Christina Neal
Editorial postal address:
Kelsey Publishing Ltd, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING
TANDEM MEDIA LTD
Managing Director Catherine Rowe
01233 228750
catherine.rowe@tandemmedia.co.uk
Account Manager Ben Rayment
01233 228752
ben@tandemmedia.co.uk
Ad Production Manager Andy Welch
01233 220245
mensfit@tandemmedia.co.uk

MANAGEMENT
Managing Director Phil Weeden
Chief Executive Steve Wright
Chairman Steve Annetts
Finance Director Joyce Parker-Sarioglu
Publishing Director Kevin McCormick
Retail Distribution Managers
Eleanor Brown, Steve Brown
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Nicola Pollard
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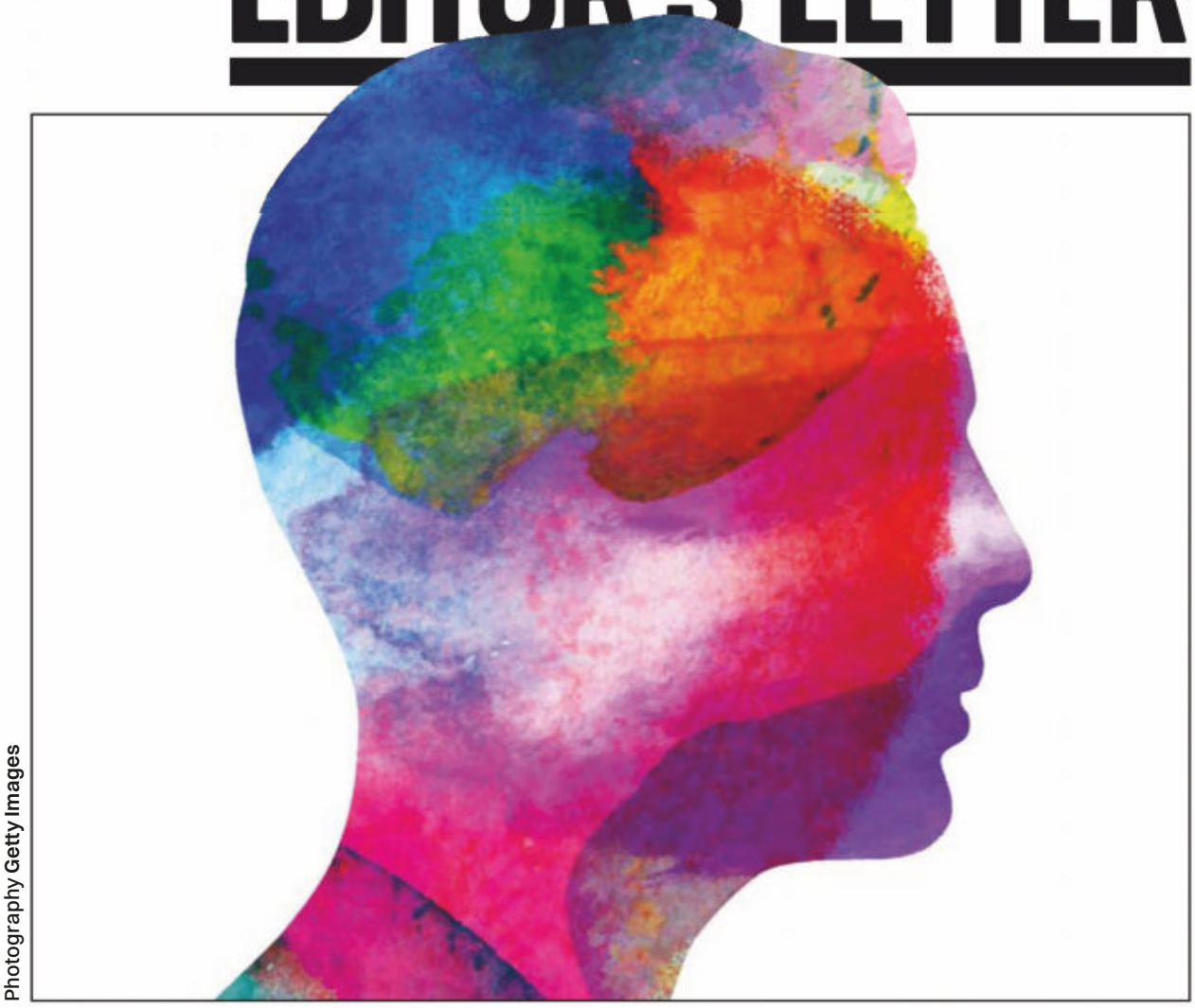
EDITOR'S LETTER



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HEAD FIRST

We can all strive to be fitter. But whether you exercise to look good, feel good or perform better, any progress made – in the gym, in competition or otherwise – will ultimately leave you unfulfilled if you don't also commit time to your mental health.

The trouble is, working on your wellbeing isn't nearly as simple as working out. That's not to say getting stronger, fitter, leaner or bigger is easy, but at least there are tried-and-tested formulas to follow. To reach a sound state of mind, there are no such blueprints – which is precisely why so much importance is placed on opening up and talking about how we feel. With honesty and awareness comes the realisation that everyone – no matter how #blessed they are on Instagram – faces their own invisible battles. Once that's accepted, seeking support becomes something to be encouraged, not stigmatised.

That's why this New Year issue of *MF* is dedicated as much to mental health as it is to physical fitness. If, in 2020, we all focused just as much on the former, all else – fitness included – would be affected for the good.

Editor
lsaac.williams@kelsey.co.uk
@IsaacWilliamsHQ

CORRECTION CORNER
(NOT, WE HOPE, A REGULAR THING)

In the December-dated issue, our round-up of some of the best home gym machines featured an incorrect image. The correct Body Power Pro-Home Gym with Leg Press Attachment is pictured above. Find out more at fitness-superstore.co.uk

In the last issue, if you noticed our Big Interview with climber James Pearson was cut cruelly short, unfortunately that wasn't an intentional cliff-hanger. A printing error meant pages 62-63 were a repeat from the previous issue. Apologies! You can read the full, uninterrupted chat with Pearson on our website: mensfitness.co.uk

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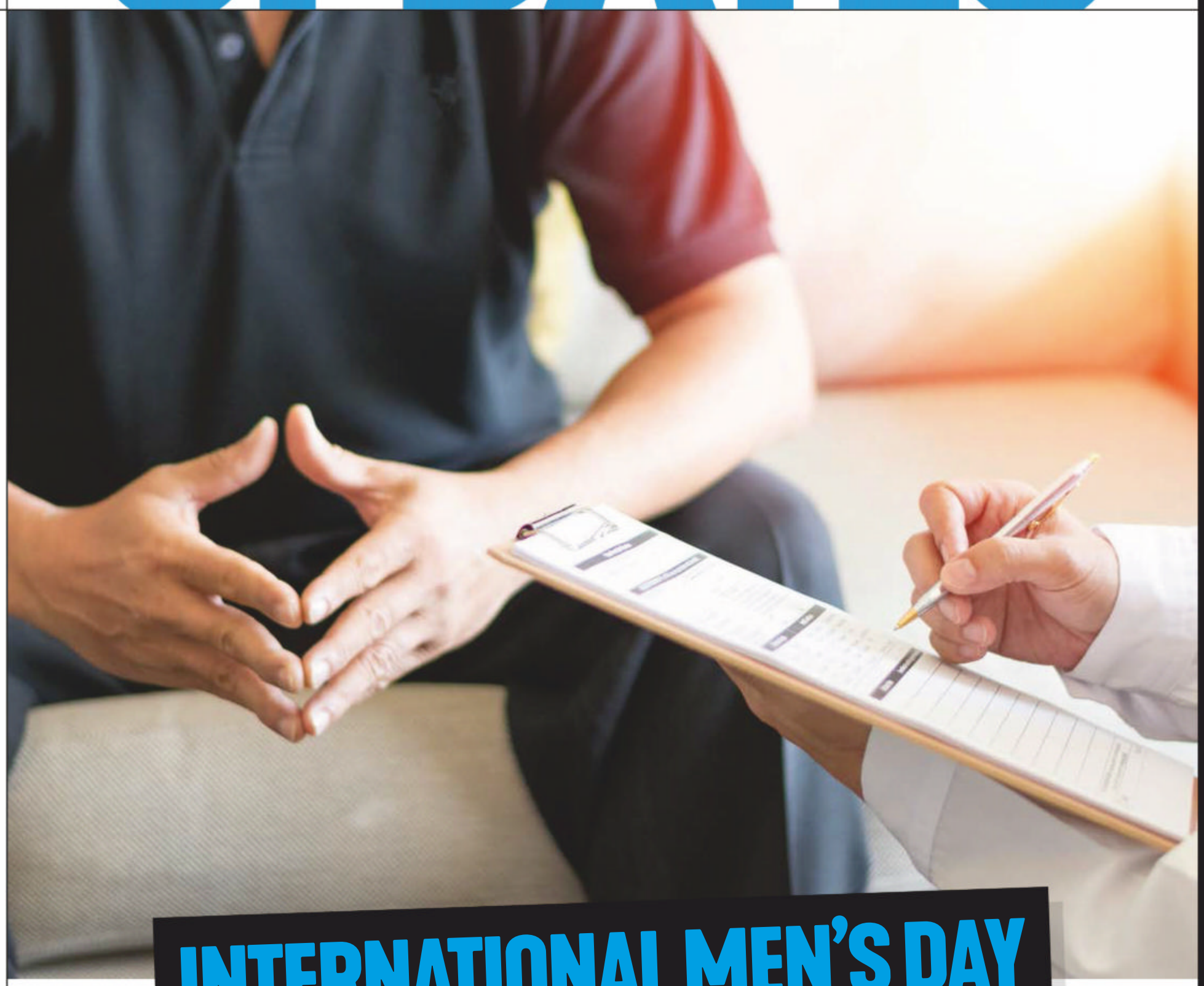

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S DAY

19 November 2019 marked the day for raising awareness about men's health. Sadly, when it comes to speaking up about our issues – whether mental or physical – we still have a long way to go, as these stats prove...

76% of men don't carry out any regular recommended cancer checks.

52% of men have not visited a doctor in up to five years.

16% of men have ignored serious symptoms due to a lack of time to visit the doctor.

22% of men know they have a family history of cancer but haven't taken any steps to avoid it.

15% of men feel professional strain prevents them from addressing serious concerns over their health.

18% of men don't have time to see a doctor regarding their mental health.

28% of men are worried about the stigma surrounding opening up about their mental health.

Nearly 2.5 million men in the UK are either currently concerned about symptoms of a serious illness or have a family history of cancer, yet don't feel they have the time to get checked out.

If you're one of those men reading this, know that whatever your issue, you're not alone. It might feel embarrassing or awkward, but opening up about how you feel, or simply picking up the phone and making an appointment, won't only help to put your mind at ease; it could save your life.

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15 MINUTES WITH...

KASH BUTT, FOUNDER OF BOOTS AND BEARDS, AN OUTDOOR ACTIVITY GROUP THAT FOCUSES ON BRINGING TOGETHER PEOPLE FROM THE BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BME) COMMUNITY TO WIDEN THEIR ACCESS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

MF: WHAT IS BOOTS AND BEARDS AND WHY DID YOU SET IT UP?

KB: "I was driving home from work one day and my cousin called me. He said, 'Kash, we don't see enough of each other, why don't we get together and go for a walk in the hills?'

"I said, 'That's a good idea you know.' We got our families together and for a few Sundays we picked random destinations out in the hills, got up early – around 7am – and went walking. Within that time, we had a bit of banter, got some exercise, enjoyed the fresh air and the kids were out away from their screens. After each walk, I posted pictures and a little description on Facebook. My friends began getting in touch saying, 'This looks amazing, why didn't you tell me?!'

"We realised there was an appetite for this sort of thing within the community, so we decided to set up a group to cater for the demand. That was back in 2015, then in April 2016 we came up with Boots and Beards (bootsandbeards.co.uk)."

MF: WHY DID YOU PARTNER WITH COLUMBIA SPORTSWEAR?

KB: "Columbia Sportswear came forward and told us about the work they're doing with UK National Parks to celebrate diversity in the great outdoors. That is what we're all about. We want people – particularly those who live in urban environments – to get outside and realise the benefits of being in nature. You can see a change in people as soon as they step into a rural environment. They start to open up more and talk about their lives – it's amazing."

MF: WHY DO YOU THINK IT'S IMPORTANT TO ENCOURAGE THE BME COMMUNITY TO GET OUT MORE AND EXPERIENCE THE NATURAL WORLD?

KB: "From what I've seen with the BME community, we are very focused on work. So Monday to Saturday is all about getting into the office, or the shop, or wherever it might be and making money to secure a stable future for your family. Then when Sunday comes around, you're knackered and you just want to relax or spend time at home with your family. That is great in a sense, but if you keep chasing money with no outside interests, you're going to do yourself harm – physically and mentally – in the long run.

"Speaking personally, I used to play football twice a week and that was the only fitness I got. Then in December of 2013 I got very ill and was taken into hospital. I almost lost my life. I had to learn how to walk and get my speech back, and that experience has given me a huge appreciation for the fact I have my life back; I don't want to waste it in front of the TV. Let's get out there, make memories and have amazing experiences."

ADVENTURE CLOTHING BRAND COLUMBIA SPORTSWEAR HAS TEAMED UP WITH UK NATIONAL PARKS TO LAUNCH A CAMPAIGN AIMED AT CELEBRATING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS. FIND OUT MORE AT COLUMBIASPORTSWEAR.CO.UK

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HERO OF THE MONTH

Dorset-born endurance runner Nick Butter has become the first person to run a marathon in every country on Earth: all 196 of them. Twenty-two months after starting his challenge in Canada, the 30-year-old former banker crossed the final finish line in Athens – the historic home of the marathon – to complete an epic journey. On the way, Butter took 455 flights, visited just over two countries a week, ran through 15 war zones and was mugged twice. He has raised over £65,000 for Prostate Cancer UK.

MYTH BUSTER

SORE MUSCLES = GOOD WORK

Don't measure the effectiveness of a workout on how sore your muscles are the next day. Soreness is a direct result of inflammation, not training intensity. You can have the best session ever and feel relatively fresh the next day, just because your body is adapted to that style of training. The moral of the story? Measure progress against your goals, not whether you feel like you've gone ten rounds with Tyson or not.

Photography Getty Images

3 WAYS TO... BOOST YOUR BENCH

More than just a staple of any gym bro's routine, the bench press is a true hallmark of strength. To continue piling on the plates, try the following tips out for size.

GET PUMPED

You're never going to lift big if you're yawning your way to the bench and daydreaming about dinner. Hitting your target weight requires focus and, if needed, a ritual to get yourself psyched up. A study conducted with elite rugby players by researchers at AUT University, found that when they pumped themselves up for a set of bench press, force production increased by eight per cent. Head in the game!

BEND THE BAR

As you lower the weight, pull your shoulder blades together and try to bend the bar in half. This is more than just a macho power move; the pulling motion maintains the retracted shoulder position and tension throughout the movement, which increases upper-body stability and, in turn, power output.

BREATHE!

One of the most common mistakes in the gym is also one of the easiest to rectify. All you have to do is remember to breathe properly. A proper breathing pattern provides stability and prevents passing out – it's a win win. Simply inhale as you lower the bar and forcibly exhale as you explosively push the bar up.

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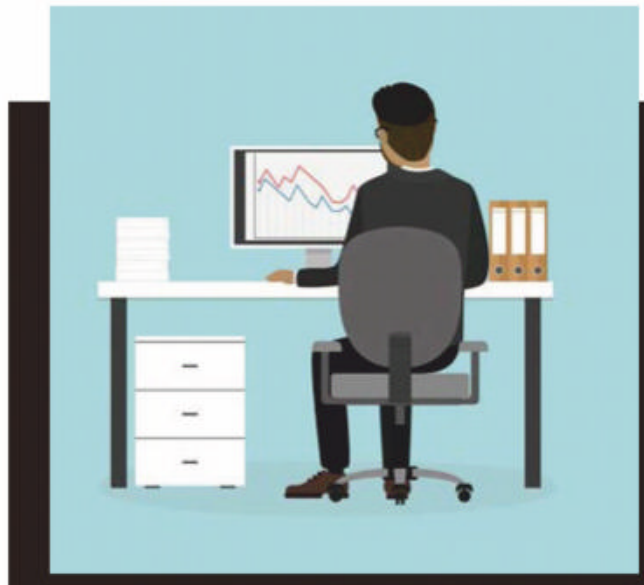
PRESCRIPTION WHEELS

A cycling-on-prescription scheme trialled in Yorkshire could soon be rolled out across the UK. More than 1,000 people have been referred to the scheme since it launched four years ago and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with figures from 2018/2019 showing people using the scheme reporting a marked increase in feeling more confident and relaxed. Speaking to the BBC, Jenny Box, Cycling UK's head of development, said: "Cycling UK has always known cycling can help people with both their physical and mental wellbeing – and in West Yorkshire we've now got the evidence."

THE COST OF CLUTTER

There's plenty of research to show how physical mess can affect your mental health. One study by Professor Joseph Ferraria found that the more clutter people have in their homes, the lower their life satisfaction and overall productivity tends to be. Similarly, in examining a century of research on stress and wellbeing, a study conducted by the University of South Carolina noted that a comfortable environment was seen as essential to 'mental hygiene'. A cluttered home can be bad news for your diet, too: a 2017 study showed that people are more likely to eat high-processed food and snacks if the environment in which they're offered a choice of foods is chaotic and they're led to feel stressed.[1]



COOPED UP

As a nation, 90 per cent of our time is spent indoors. That's according to a survey by Nature Valley, which also revealed only 12 per cent of Londoners leave the office at any point in the day and 66 per cent of Brits only leave their chair to go to the toilet. All this is bad news for our mental wellbeing.

Too much time indoors can lead "to a range of problems for workers, including everything from seasonal affective disorder (SAD) in the winter months due to a lack of natural daylight, to sick building syndrome (SBS), especially in buildings with poor ventilation," explains professor Charles Spence, experimental psychologist at the University of Oxford.

"The good news," Spence continues, "is that an hour spent outside is proven to drastically improve short-term memory and decrease stress levels."

Nature Valley's 'Get Out More' campaign is an attempt to tackle the nation's indoor problem – find out more at naturevalley.co.uk/get-out-more

Sweet Sounds

Struggling to get through your sessions? An updated playlist could be the cure. Music's ability to both motivate and reduce our perceived effort is nothing new, but a recent study published in the *Journal of Psychology of Sport and Exercise* found the right music can also help you enjoy training more, with fast-tempo tracks found to be the most effective.

ON CALL

In an effort to make therapy more accessible and less of a 'thing', Glyde is the new telephone and video call therapy service that negates the potential intimidation factor and inconvenience of face-to-face meetings. You can speak to a qualified therapist from the comfort of your own home, when it suits you. There's no fixed price, as each therapist sets their own fee, but you can speak to someone for as little as £45. To find out more, visit glyde.co.

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TOO MUCH TOO YOUNG

Unsurprisingly, elite athletes are at lower risk of developing cardiovascular problems than the rest of us. One group, though, is an exception to the rule. American football linemen have a higher risk of heart problems than the general population, and a recent study published in *JAMA Cardiology* suggests the players' rapid weight gain – an average lineman weighs 136kg – is to blame. "What we're seeing is a young, otherwise healthy group of people that gain weight and develop thick hearts and stiff arteries," said the study's lead author Aaron L. Baggish, MD. "If you took a 20-year-old who didn't play a sport and asked them to gain 40 pounds, no one would ever question whether that was unhealthy."

ON TREND

The American College of Sports Medicine has released the results of its annual fitness trend forecast for 2020 and top of the list is wearable tech. Technology advances have made it easier than ever for users to collect important health metrics and work to improve exercise efficiency, develop healthy lifestyles and even manage chronic diseases. Other key trends include high-intensity interval training (HIIT), group training (both in the top three for three years in a row), an increased interest in 'Exercise is Medicine', and fitness programmes for older adults. Training with free weights debuts at number four.

THINK FAST

Working out before work is a necessity for many, but its benefits extend beyond simply fitting everything in. When your body is in a fasted state (before breakfast), insulin levels are low and fat stores are the primary source of energy. A recent six-week study involving men showed those that exercised before eating burned double the amount of fat as those who exercised after breakfast. It also improved insulin sensitivity, which may make it easier to maintain your weight.

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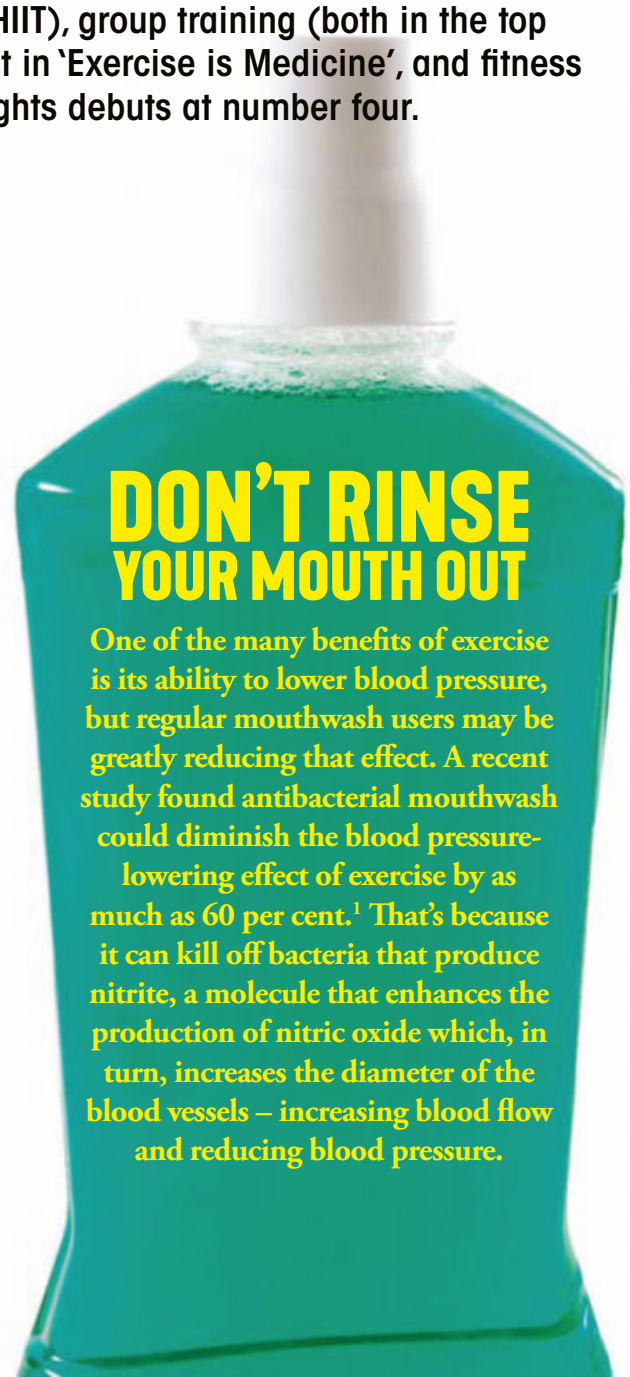
is the average annual price of gym membership in the UK, and according to personal finance provider Moneyboat, high costs are the reason 47 per cent of people refuse to sign up.



DON'T RINSE YOUR MOUTH OUT

One of the many benefits of exercise is its ability to lower blood pressure, but regular mouthwash users may be greatly reducing that effect. A recent study found antibacterial mouthwash could diminish the blood pressure-lowering effect of exercise by as much as 60 per cent.[1] That's because it can kill off bacteria that produce nitrite, a molecule that enhances the production of nitric oxide which, in turn, increases the diameter of the blood vessels – increasing blood flow and reducing blood pressure.

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TRAINING ERRORS

Finding progress hard to come by? There's a chance you're making one of these mistakes. Marvin Burton, head of fitness at Anytime Fitness, is here to help

Photography Getty Images

1. OVERTRAINING

Overtraining can be more destructive than constructive, because your body can only develop at a certain rate. If you're training seven days a week, you're not allowing for adequate adaptation and muscle repair. Training smart, rather than hard, is a philosophy we should all adopt.
Solution: train a maximum of five days a week and incorporate two or three rest days into your schedule.

2. POOR PLANNING

It's quite common to see other people in a gym not following any type of structure, plan or goals. But having a structured plan in which you update and record your efforts will help you identify patterns and trends in your training. Subsequently, you will begin to see areas that need changing, developing, improving, reducing or removing. Recording the variables of your exercise is also important. Maintaining a log of your times, tempos and rest periods will contribute towards your success. If you're not tracking this data, you won't know when to increase or modify your training approach.
Solution: seek the guidance of a personal trainer to build a plan tailored to your needs and fitness level, as well as to keep records of your training.

3. JUNK FOOD

Nutrition should be viewed as fuel for your exercise. Our choices before, during and after training will contribute to our energy, ability and recovery. When it comes to portion sizes, I find the easiest method of control is using fist-sized amounts, so your carbohydrate, protein and vegetable portions are about the same size as your clenched fist. It's worth noting, though, that you can never overeat green vegetables, so if you're going to increase the portion size of anything on your plate, make it those.
Solution: plan your meals in advance. Spend the first four weeks implementing smaller, manageable changes and create better habits.

4. INCORRECT KIT

Running in old trainers can lead to over-straining of muscles, and contribute to shin splints or pain underfoot known as plantar fasciitis. Likewise, cycling in the incorrect footwear or lifting weights in your overly restrictive kit can lead to referred pain and injury.
Solution: invest in a good pair of gym trainers, and wear appropriate and non-restrictive clothing to exercise.

5. COPYCATTING

When it comes to working out, take social media advice with a big pinch of salt; having a large following on Instagram doesn't validate claims. Copying and watching others in the gym is also potentially detrimental to your training. Equally, replicating the training or nutrition plan of a professional athlete isn't a smart thing to do; they're usually well conditioned and expertly coached. You should only train relative to your fitness level and progress accordingly.
Solution: again, a PT can provide guidance. Even if you only have one session every month, they can ensure you're on track and performing exercises correctly. MF

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POC

PICTURE PREVIEW

LETTING OFF STEAM

Street trials rider and YouTube star Danny MacAskill hops in front of a train in Edinburgh while filming his 2016 short *Wee Day Out*. Some of the Scotsman's other jaw-dropping videos include *Imaginate*, *Epecuén* and the edit that first catapulted him into the spotlight, *Way Back Home*. Ten years on from that original film, *Men's Fitness* sat down with MacAskill to discuss his life of tricks, flicks and internet stardom.

READ THE INTERVIEW ON PAGE 58 »

Photography Red Bull

SWIPE THE FOG AWAY

COBRA ULTRA SWIPE
POWERSKIN GOGGLE

SWIPE ANTI-FOG CAN BE REACTIVATED WITH A FINGER, TO EXTEND ITS PROTECTION UP TO 10 TIMES.

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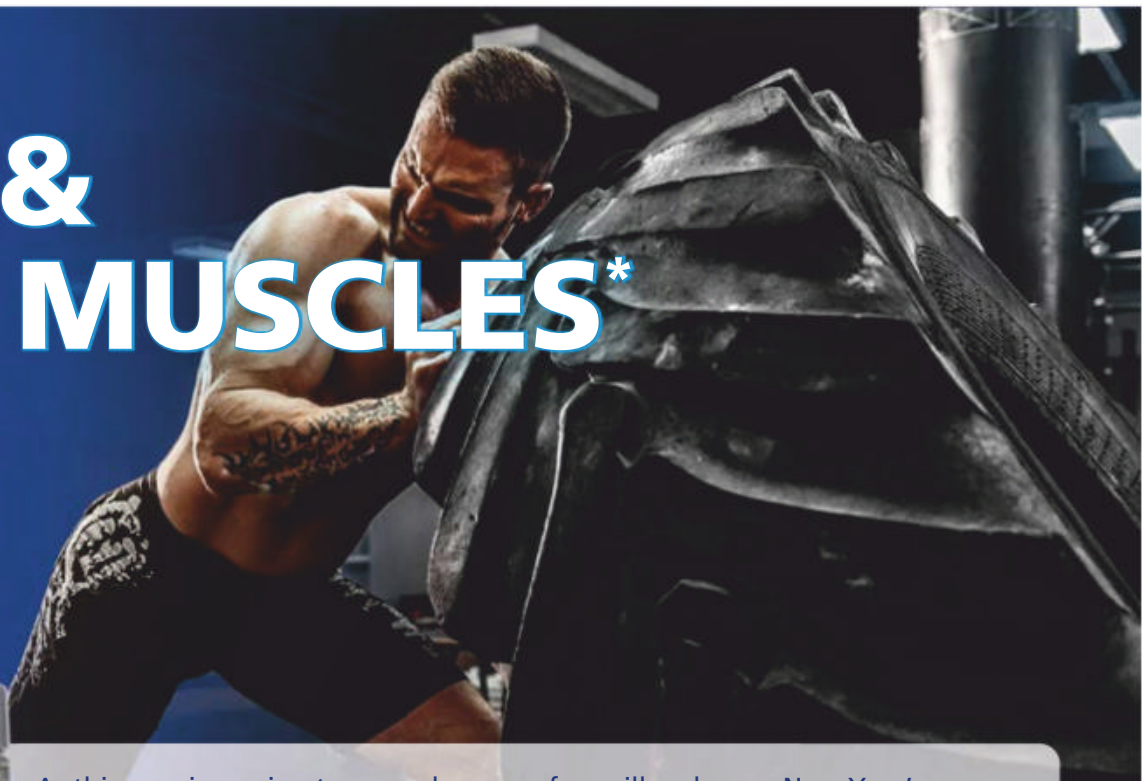
TRAIN STRONG & SUPPORT YOUR MUSCLES*

With Bioglan Active Magnesium



As this year is coming to an end, many of us will make our New Year's resolutions – maybe to lose weight or grow stronger, but other than exercise have you thought about how else you are going to achieve your goals?

Introducing the NEW Bioglan Active Magnesium range to help you achieve your fitness goals by supporting normal muscle function* & reducing tiredness & fatigue. Our expertly created supplements use more absorbable forms of Magnesium so that your body reaps the most benefits. Our three unique formats are perfect to suit your needs & lifestyle including, an easy to swallow tablet, a delicious citrus flavoured powder, which contains Amino Acids & Electrolytes, plus a cream for topical application. Help accomplish your New Year's fitness resolution with Bioglan Active Magnesium range.

*Tablets & Powder refer to EFSA authorised health claim

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Bioglan.co.uk

PERFECT FIT

CHEAP AND CHEERFUL

Expensive training shoes look the part, but when it comes to performance they might not be all they're cracked up to be. That's according to a recent RunRepeat study that looked at 323,776 reviews of 336 trainers from 20 different brands. The analysis focused on the pricing, rating and savings for shoes across the entire category, as well as individual brands. Not only were expensive shoes found to be no better than cheaper alternatives, but inexpensive shoes actually received higher ratings and user satisfaction scores.

The top ten most expensive shoes cost 183.05 per cent more and had a 2.3 per cent lower rating, on average, than these ten cheapest options:

- Reebok Flexagon Energy
- Avia Avi-Edge
- Skechers Haniger – Casspi
- Skechers Haniger
- Avia Avi-Tangent
- Avia Avi-Rival
- adidas Essential Fun 2.0
- adidas Essential Star 3
- Avia Avi-Verge
- Avia Avi-Solstice

Photography Getty Images

NEW YEAR BEST BUYS

Father Christmas fail to deliver the goods? Take to the January sales with these product picks in mind

GORE® X ROMANCE GORE-TEX SHAKEDRY™

£270, gorewear.com

They say: 'Designed for road cyclists wanting to ride in a bright, stylish jacket that offers the highest levels of rain protection and breathability.'
We say: A great-looking jacket that combines cycling-specific details with a standout design. It's highly breathable, completely windproof and waterproof enough to withstand the worst of the British winter. And if you do get caught in a storm, that SHAKEDRY technology means water simply beads up and trickles off the jacket's surface. Expensive, yes, but it might just make those dark January rides a little more appealing.

ZONE 3 SOFT-TOUCH LONG SLEEVE

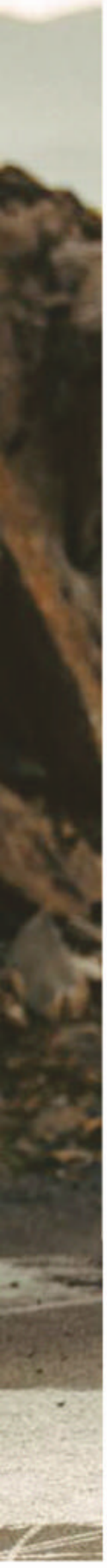
£40, zone3.com

They say: 'High-quality performance fabrics combined with features such as reflective taping and laser bonded collar result in a garment which feels as good as it looks.'
We say: Best to buy a size up as it fits snug, but for the relatively cheap price this has a premium feel and – assuming you do go one bigger – excellent fit. Designed as a mid-layer for cold-weather training, but its soft-touch fabric and contemporary look makes it just as suited to casual wear.

CASTORE VILMA LONG SLEEVED TEE

£65, castore.com

They say: 'With a tailored fit designed for comfort, the Vilma tee is in its element both during intense workouts and post-training relaxation.'
We say: The stripped-back look belies a typically sophisticated Castore design, featuring super-soft Pique fabric, temperature regulation (keeping you cool when you up the effort and locking heat in when the cold begins to bite) and fabric infused with Antimicrobial Silver to keep sweat smells at bay. Simple, elegant, effective.



BERGHAUS RONNAS REFLECT INSULATED JACKET

£200, berghaus.com

They say: 'Pockets of warmth are held just where you need them thanks to expert body mapping, while breathable Reflect technology bounces your body heat back to you, keeping you up to 20 per cent warmer.'
We say: Giving new meaning to the phrase 'wrap up warm', this is the cosiest jacket you're ever likely to have the pleasure of putting on. The Hydrodown insulation keeps heat in, even in wet weather, while simpler perks like an internal chest pocket and harness-friendly pockets make it as practical as it is plush.

ON WEATHER SHIRT

£100, on-running.com

They say: 'Technical fabrics work with carefully cut airflow channels for comfortable high performance in low temperatures.'
We say: Performance and comfort combine in this top, which is the perfect in-between for those runs when a t-shirt is not enough, but a jacket's too much. It comes complete with a nifty little 'watch window' built into the sleeves, so you don't need to roll them up to check your stats. It's the little things...

UA RUSH COLDGEAR MOCK

£60, underarmour.co.uk

They say: 'Mineral-infused fabric absorbs the energy your body emits and reflects it back into your tissues and muscles. That means your muscles can work harder. And you get better.'
We say: It might be made with top-of-the-range tech, but simply speaking the ColdGear Mock is an excellent long-sleeve option for winter running. Comfy, breathable and restriction-free, whether the mineral-infused fabric really does allow your muscles to work harder is up for debate, but there's no denying its abilities as a cold-weather training top.

DRYROBE ADVANCE LONG SLEEVE

£140, dryrobe.com

They say: 'Get dry, cover up and stay warm with dryrobe. The long sleeve design provides extra warmth and is ideal for those waiting to compete or watching sporting events.'
We say: From wild swimming to obstacle course racing, dryrobe takes post-event comfort to new heights. The Advance Long Sleeve allows you to keep warm and dry off almost instantly, with enough room to pull your arms inside and get changed. This is the type of kit you don't know you need until you have it.

BODY POWER RUBBER HEX DUMBBELLS & RACK

£214.99, fitness-superstore.co.uk

They say: 'Commercial-quality dumbbells that are highly durable, with rubber encasing and ergonomic contoured grip. The included rack provides safe and easy storage.'
We say: An easy-to-assemble set of weights that's as good as anything you'll find in the gym. The 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10kg pairs of dumbbells feel nice and sturdy, while the rubber casings provide both peace of mind (particularly if you have a wooden floor) and greater comfort than steel alternatives.

ZWIFT RUNPOD

£29.99, zwift.com

They say: 'Our new RunPod connects to your device so you can experience running with a community and see treadmill workouts in a new way.'
We say: The RunPod is an innocuous looking bit of kit, but it greatly enhances any Zwifter's experience, measuring real-world metrics like speed and cadence, and broadcasting them in your virtual run. Non-Zwifters can get in on the act, too, by downloading the MilestonePod app and accessing all those RunPod stats.

GIANT RECON HL 700 AND RECON TL 200 COMBO

£89.99, giant-bicycles.com

They say: 'Both lights feature an innovative sensor that detects ambient light and adjusts output accordingly. This allows you to focus on riding without being distracted.'
We say: Giant knows a thing or two about dependable cycling clobber, and this front/rear light combo is your perfect companion for low-light rides to or from work. The light-sensoring headlight adjusts its output according to the natural brightness levels, while the waterproof tail light beams out up to 200 lumens, to ensure your visibility on the road is never an issue.

PLANTRONICS BACKBEAT PRO 5100

£159.99, plantronics.com

They say: 'Whether you're immersed in music or taking calls, you'll enjoy all-day comfort and immersive sound in our tiniest, lightest true wireless earbuds yet.'
We say: For when you want to get lost in music, these smart-sensing earbuds from Plantronics are as slick and compact as anything else out there, with a crisp sound quality that's hard to beat – especially for the price. The charging case provides up to 6.5 hours of charge, but if you're short on time a ten-minute charge will give you an hour's worth of play time.

AFTERSHOKZ AEROPEX HEADPHONES

£149.95, aftershokz.co.uk

They say: 'Thirty per cent smaller and 13 per cent lighter, experience unrivalled all-day comfort no matter where life takes you.'
We say: Aftershokz's bone-conducting headphones are designed so you can stay cognizant of your surroundings while listening to your favourite audio, meaning a far safer run or ride for both you and those around you. They're also highly durable, waterproof and virtually impossible to accidentally shake off during an intense session.

POLAR IGNITE

£174.50, polar.com/ignite

They say: 'An all-round fitness watch that offers advanced metrics and training recommendations with new features such as Sleep Stages Plus, Nightly Recharge and FitSpark.'
We say: You might remember the Ignite from our wristwear roundup a couple of issues back. It came out on top then, and it's still our favourite fitness watch on the market. You'll find all the training metrics you could want, and its recovery insights – including heart-rate variability scores – are second to none. It's also equipped with a range of built-in workouts and on-screen coaching options.

GRENADE CARB KILLA PROTEIN BAR

£29.98 (box of 12), grenade.com

They say: 'High in protein (20g), and incredibly low in sugar (2g), this bar contains 242 calories, making it the ultimate healthy sweet treat or post-workout snack.'

We say: Low-carb and high-protein is a pretty good combo for anyone looking to slim down, but it's not always a delight for the tastebuds. Grenade has managed to solve that issue with these bars that taste so good they should be bad. The texture is gooey and nothing like as gritty as protein bars can be, and at 242 calories the bars provide just the right level of fullness without being sickly or too much to manage.

Men's Fitness BEST BUY

BIO-SYNERGY BACK TO FITNESS BOX

£45, bio-synergy.uk

They say: 'If you're looking to get in the best shape of your life, this stack is just what you need to make it happen.'

We say: It's a bold claim, but a box containing great-tasting, award-winning Whey Hey protein, L-carnatine and green tea-infused Super Burn capsules, and a Dual Fuel shaker (different drinks for different needs) certainly isn't a bad place to start. £45 represents pretty good value, too.

CLIF BAR

£1.50 (per bar), clifbar.co.uk

They say: 'With performance in mind, CLIF Bar is the ultimate plant-based energy bar that is purposefully crafted with great-tasting, wholesome ingredients.'

We say: CLIF Bar is a big-hitter in the world of endurance sport, and for good reason. Its energy bars – available in a range of flavours – contain natural ingredients that taste great and provide a noticeable boost to both focus and performance.

PULSIN KETO BAR

£2 (per bar), pulsin.co.uk

They say: 'Pulsin's exciting new Choc Fudge & Peanut Keto bar is low in carbs and sugar. It's also vegan, gluten-free and high in plant-based protein.'

We say: Another high-protein, low-carb option, this all-new bar from Pulsin packs in whole chunks of peanuts and chocolate fudge for a pleasant whole-food experience. An ideal snack for anyone looking to reduce their carb intake post-Christmas.

MY PROTEIN LAYERED PROTEIN BAR

£24.99 (box of 12), myprotein.com

They say: 'Our six-layer Protein Bar features six irresistible layers of taste and texture to provide a hit of protein, carbohydrates and fibre all in a delicious and convenient bar.'

We say: Think Double Decker meets White Lion Bar and you won't be far off this new release from My Protein. There's none of the stodginess you got with protein bars of old, but with 20g protein it's a beneficial post-training treat, with 10/10 taste to boot.

HEALTHSPAN ELITE KICK-START CAFFEINE GUM

£24.99, healthspan.co.uk

They say: 'Kick-Start Gum delivers 100mg of caffeine in a fast-release chewing gum. At only 20p per piece, it's a gym bag essential.'

We say: This gum provides a more instant boost than other caffeinated products, because the caffeine is absorbed through your saliva rather than having to be digested first. Fast-acting, long-lasting and perfect for anyone who doesn't like coffee or luminous pre-workouts.

GOAL MACHINES

The best new tech for creating you 2.0

Welcome to 2020, fitness fans – you're finally living in the future. The good news: there's more to modern life than gym selfies and added protein in everything. You now have access to a growing fitness toolbox of sensors, trackers and stimulators to help you upgrade yourself in double-quick time.

Whatever your goal for the year ahead, we've found cutting-edge tech that can boost your chances of bossing your ambitions.

GOAL: CARDIOVASCULAR FITNESS

WATTBIKE ATOM

From £1,599, wattbike.com

Wattbike Pro/Trainer bikes are the ride of choice for spin studio sufferfests, but they cost big bucks. The Atom cuts the cost (slightly) of recreating those saddle sessions in your very own pain cave, with a bike that's tailored for home use.

Unlike some stationary set-ups that take hours to construct and calibrate, the Atom comes practically ready to ride out of the box. Vertical and horizontal sliders for the saddle, and height adjustment for the handlebars, make tweaking the cycling position nice and easy, with thankfully very little wielding of allen keys. You can also bring your own pedals and handlebars to customise your ride.

The Atom's magnetic resistance, with a 0–2000W power range and ±2 per cent data accuracy, makes for much quieter – though still not silent – training sessions. The ride feels close to real, supported by the inclusion of integrated gear shifts like you'd find on your regular road bike. That's particularly important when it comes to moving up and down the 22 gears mid-ride, while you're tackling automated gradient simulation that ranges from 0-25 per cent.

Men's Fitness BEST BUY

When it comes to simulating hills, automated resistance in climb mode serves up the full ride experience – complete with burning lungs and quads. Meanwhile, Bluetooth and ANT+ F-EC mean there's wide connectivity with your favourite accessories and fitness apps, so you can lose yourself in the routes and training sessions in virtual platforms, such as Zwift and Trainer Road.

Even if you're not a Zwifter, you can still access more than 37 real-time ride metrics and training plans in the Wattbike Hub.

Granted, the price tag represents a chunky investment, but if cycling is your go-to and you're not a fan of turbo trainers, this is one of the best bikes you can get.

Fitness gains	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Motivation	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★★

Words Kieran Alger

COMPEX SP 8.0

From £779.99, compex.com/uk

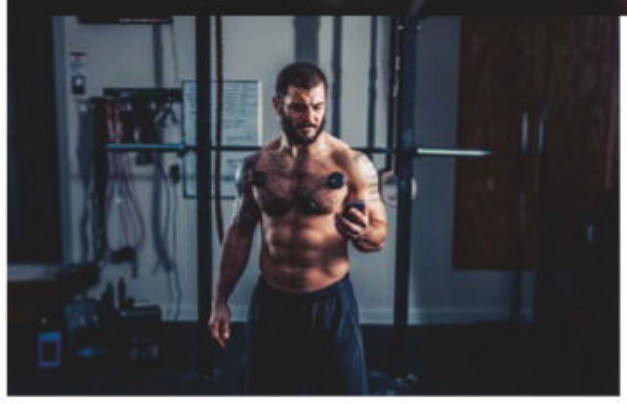
GOAL: IMPROVED RECOVERY

Men's Fitness RECOMMENDED

Machines that fire electrical signals into your muscles – particularly your abs – get a bad rep for being novelty shortcuts to some of the most popular fitness goals. But the Compex SP 8.0 is no magic six-pack maker. It's a serious wireless muscle stimulator, widely used by professional athletes and physios. It works by sending electric pulses to your motor nerves in order to create muscle contractions and address a number of common training concerns.

Top of that list is good recovery and limiting training time lost to injury. The multi-purpose e-stim can be used to activate muscles pre-workout and stimulate low-impact muscle strengthening. It can also help with recovery, provide pain relief and even give a soothing massage.

Additionally, the Compex is equipped with a range of automated features, such as muscle scans, that adjust stimulator parameters to your needs.



Fitness gains	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Motivation	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

STRYD

£199.00, stryd.com

This tiny power-tracking sensor fixes to your laces like a race timing chip and lets you optimise your training sessions by following a consistent measurement of effort on each run. Unlike heart rate and pace, power isn't affected by changing external conditions like hills or heat. And now Stryd even lets you adjust your running effort according to how windy it is. The pod also delivers improved accuracy over GPS, making those really important run stats more reliable.

GOAL: RUN FASTER

Fitness gains	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Motivation	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

STEALTH PLANKSTER

$199.00, stealthbodyfitness.com

The plank – and its many variations – is one of the most effective ab exercises around, but let's face it, 'lying' face down to the floor while your core gets torched is far from fun. Stealth aims to add some excitement and ease some of the pain. You simply stick your elbows on the balance board, slot your phone into the holder, fire up the app and it transforms those boring, burny holds into addictive games where minor positional changes clock you points.

GOAL: STRONG CORE

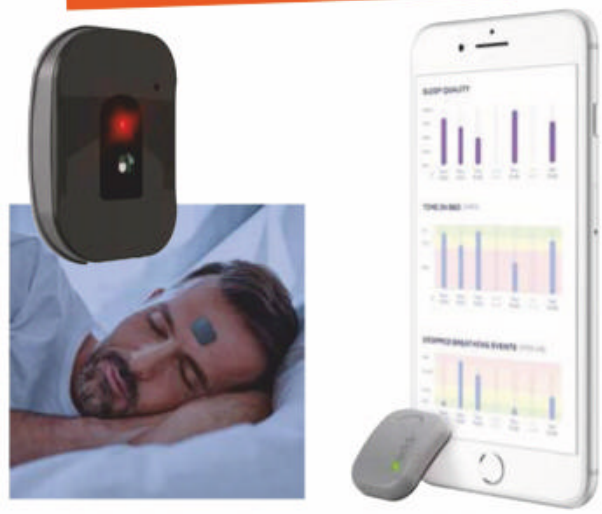
Fitness gains	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Motivation	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

BEDDR

$149.00, beddrsleep.com

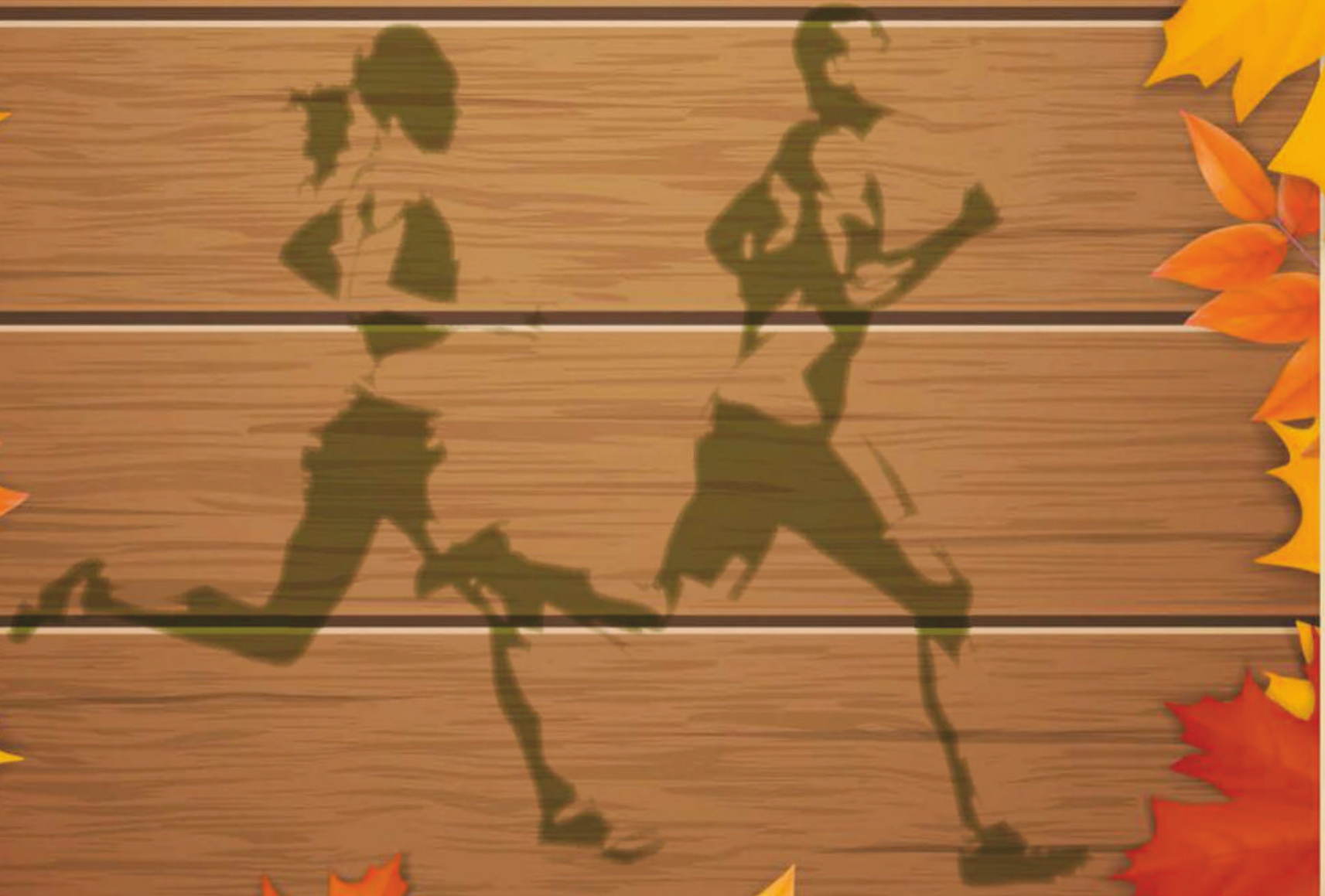
Whether you're chasing weight loss, muscle gain or improved cardio capacity, good sleep is the foundation of every fitness aspiration. Beddr's forehead-worn monitor offers you the chance to improve by going beyond the insights offered by most sleep trackers. Its optical and motion sensors keep tabs on sleep quality, heart rate, breathing, oxygen saturation and sleep position. The clinical-grade data it gathers can genuinely help you spot what's needed for better shut eye.

GOAL: IMPROVED SLEEP



Fitness gains	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Motivation	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

PARK LIFE



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS IN A LEAFY CORNER OF WEST LONDON, PARKRUN HAS SPARKED A FITNESS REVOLUTION. EVERY SATURDAY MORNING, UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY – AND INDEED AROUND THE WORLD – WALKERS, JOGGERS AND RUNNERS OF ALL SHAPES, SIZES, AGES AND ABILITIES HEAD TO THEIR LOCAL PARK FOR A FREE, TIMED 5K EVENT. BUT WITH ITS EMPHASIS ON COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVITY, IT HAS BECOME MORE THAN JUST A SERIES OF RUNNING EVENTS: FOR MANY, IT'S AN OUTLET – A SAFE CONSTANT IN THEIR

WEEKLY ROUTINE

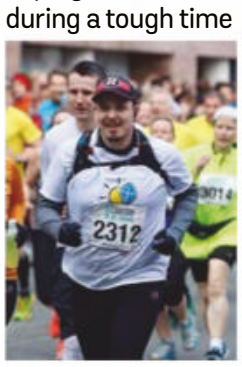
"I can blame my parkrun addiction on the pub," says Paul Shipman. "I'd gone for a drink at The Twisted Barrel in Coventry and one of my wife's friends asked me what sort of running I'd been doing. I told her I'd just been putting my trainers on and going along the street, and she said, 'We should do parkrun.'

"Two pints in, I foolishly asked what she meant and she explained that every Saturday morning you get to Memorial Park for 9am and run 5k. I said I'd go with her, and the parkrun spiral started from there."

Shipman, in his mid-30s and working in HR, had taken up running after his son was born two months premature. Running became a cathartic coping mechanism during that highly stressful period of his life. To start, he'd grab his trainers for a jog round the block, "because the street is always open," before parkrun entered his life and became not only a treasured pastime, but an "incredible change for good" for his mental health.

Five years ago, Shipman was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. "Everybody knew it was coming," he explains, "including me, but I'd avoided going to the doctors and being treated, and I couldn't cope with it."

With the issues around his son's birth, his diagnosis, and a stressful duration in his career, Shipman found running therapeutic. "Running is mine," he says. "The only person it relies on is me, the only person it's down to is me."



For Paul Shipman, parkrun proved to be a valuable coping mechanism during a tough time

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Popping along to Coventry's Memorial Park that Saturday morning proved even more revelatory. Shipman met a friend of a friend, and then another, and they ran together at an easy pace. He was applauded by the stewards as he went around, and when they finished he and his new mates went for coffee.

"I was astonished," he says. "There were about 500 people there, with many of them making even poorer spandex choices than I had. It's the confidence thing, an amazing, supportive, welcoming environment. I loved it, went next week. Loved that week, kept going. Then it becomes a habit." parkrun quickly became more than a habit for Shipman; it became an outlet: "When I spiral from my anxiety, I go for a run, and just focus on putting one foot in front of the other. But parkrun? It's the solace of running and the feel-good spirit of friends and community combined. It's mine and yours."

parkrun's success is thanks in large part to its friendly army of volunteers

parkrun founder Paul Sinton-Hewitt

Alongside the regular events, there are also 304 junior parkruns, which have seen 305,993 kids take part

SIMPLE START

parkrun has grown into one of the most popular weekend activities in the UK, with nearly 700 different courses averaging well over 118,000 runners each week.

It was formed organically through the initiative of Paul Sinton-Hewitt, initially as a single event in west London's Bushy Park, one leafy autumn in 2004.

"Fifteen years ago, I faced some difficulties in my life," Sinton-Hewitt explains. "At the same time, I've known all my life that doing exercise helps me manage myself. But I'd got injured at that time so couldn't run. There were a few people really important to me that revolved around the running scene, so it was a disappointing situation."

Sinton-Hewitt grew up in South Africa and recalled weekly running events across the country that were free, low-key and without pressure. The events recorded your time, before publishing them in local newspapers.

"That all came flooding back to me and I thought, well, what better way to contribute both to the local athletic scene by starting something new, and ensure I see my friends weekly?"

Sinton-Hewitt would do it all himself at first. The planning took a few months: measuring the course, deciding how it would be recorded and structuring the objective (which is that there is no objective and are no obligations).

"Right from the beginning," he says, "it was set up so you can run as hard or as easily as you like. It was the community doing something for themselves, everybody taking from it what they wanted, just that they're responsible for local rules; don't be unkind, treat people with respect.

"I had a deep-rooted belief that what I was doing was good. I knew people would meet each other and become friends."

Fifteen years on, with more than 2,000 events across 21 countries, that wholesome mission statement remains.

"It sounds preposterous that you could start something like this now and keep the same ethos," Sinton-Hewitt continues. "I wasn't looking to cover all those countries, I was simply doing what I thought was best for my community, and other people latched on to it. I realised it wasn't just about me anymore, but something for everyone."

FREE 5K THERAPY

parkrun has evolved from a personal project into a worldwide movement. And woven into the fabric of such a movement are stories like Paul Shipman's: people who instinctively connect to its values, and whose mental health are helped by its practice.

The mental wellbeing benefits of regular exercise are well

"It's grown into one of the most popular weekend activities in the UK, with nearly 700 different courses averaging well over 118,000 runners each week"

documented, but scientific studies have found that exercise can be as effective as medication or psychological therapies for mental health treatment.

Dr Josephine Perry, sports psychologist at Performance In Mind, clarifies: "Three debilitating mental health issues – stress, depression and anxiety – have been studied by researchers to see whether exercise can impact the severity with which they are felt or the regularity that episodes appear.

"Researchers found that highly active individuals (especially those doing aerobic exercise like running) have lower stress rates compared to those who have only low activity levels. Researchers have also found that exercise is a beneficial treatment for those with both mild and severe (clinical) anxiety.

"The benefits of exercise also spread to those with depression, an illness estimated to be suffered by at least ten per cent of the UK population each year. A study which collated the results of 30 trials in those diagnosed with depression found exercise to be a positive and effective tool to reduce depressive symptoms."

Equally well documented are the mental health advantages of socialising, but Dr Perry insists that the specific context of parkrun, as a sport and passion, is particularly valuable.

"Doing exercise with others is a great way to make friends," she explains. "Unlike networking events, which can feel forced and awkward, with sports the friends we make are a positive side effect of the activity rather than the focus, so it feels much more natural.

"With a sport, you know that you have something in common with the other people there. It's an easy topic of conversation to help you start these new friendships, which will grow as you all go through the peaks and troughs which come with running: the injuries, illnesses, PBs and milestone t-shirts.

"Having a few specific people you regularly see at your parkrun can be really beneficial. Running alongside others can be motivating as others' positivity and enjoyment can feel contagious. We respond to the presence of other people: they can help us work harder, or make the efforts feel easier. Not by shouting or encouraging, just be being there."

SAFE CONSTANT

Dr Perry alludes to another invaluable aspect of parkrun that's neither inherent in exercising nor even necessarily

BY THE NUMBERS

180,000 people in the UK do parkrun each week, and over 330,000 globally.

6 million+ people have registered globally for parkrun.

21 countries host weekly parkruns, including Russia, Malaysia and Eswatini.

672 parkruns are up and running across the UK.

29:22 is the average parkrun time in the UK.

13:48 is the record parkrun time, set by former GB athlete Andy Baddeley.

Above: don't be surprised if you're humbled by a tiny child; it happens to the best of us

in socialising: the routine. The knowledge that it's available every Saturday, without fail.

"I spoke to someone recently who said they saw parkrun a bit like their religion," says Dr Perry. "It's just what they did on a Saturday morning and that gave them a structure they relied upon."

This is something Shipman recognises. "However bad Friday is," he says, "on Saturday I'll do my run. It's my time to get my head clear, with no demands on me. After a tough week, I run, and I'm as happy as Larry. It's an opportunity to push the reset button."

Greg Wells, health and safety director, and parkrun initiative leader, also connected with parkrun's routine.

"My spiritual home is the Lydiard Park parkrun in Swindon," he explains. "It's my Saturday morning comfort blanket. You see the same faces, and you know exactly who is running where, the guy always clocking 22:30, it's a pleasant familiarity."

Wells started doing parkrun in his late 40s, six years ago, with the intention of getting into better shape. Inevitably, though, he fell for parkrun's friendliness and inclusivity, and has been a regular ever since.

In 2017, one of Wells's close friends committed suicide.

When Greg Wells experienced personal tragedy, parkrun provided some much-needed positivity

He found solace in parkrun.

"The Saturday after he died, I turned up to parkrun in a zombie state, not really knowing what way was up, and decided to run to get some me time. I ended up running beside a girl I knew was trying to set a new PB. I gave her some encouragement for the last 2k and I felt positive after. I'd finally done something constructive after days of doing nothing."

POWER OF PARKRUN

Swindon Borough Council at the time were running seminars supporting initiatives of getting men to open up about their mental health. Wells had the idea of creating a safe space for men to discuss whatever they had on their mind at his local parkrun, or just to be a humble and supportive running partner.

"Since my friend committed suicide, I hoped to find an understanding or meaning that might shine a light on things," he says. "With parkrun, we tried to integrate discussion with the psychological benefits of exercise. But you don't want to be recommended a parkrun to go along

parkrun is a celebration of all abilities, with back-of-the-pack runners welcomed just as much as those at the front

to and not know what to expect, who to meet or what to do. The idea was to have some friendly faces in the crowd, someone who could almost be a bit of a mentor.

"It's getting people to say, 'I do feel shit today', but you don't want to be feeling like that for months on end."

We all know the stats. We all know how prevalent mental illness is. We also know its provision is chronically underfunded, its specialist waiting lists are criminally long, and its description as a 'mental health crisis' is devaluing and impersonal.

parkrun isn't a solution, and it's unlikely to raise a fraction of the funds needed to address the crisis, but both its active practice and the grassroots projects organically growing from it, such as Greg Wells's, incontrovertibly and meaningfully help.

"I'm optimistic there are better things to come," Wells says. "There is an issue that sometimes with mental health campaigns you do get people jumping on the bandwagon, but it needs to be done seriously. It's under-funded at the government level, but talking and help groups do work."

In a world compressed by vitriol and suspicion, where the seemingly good is almost always problematised by ulterior motive, something as purely positive as parkrun should be celebrated.

Paul Sinton-Hewitt is proud of what his creation has come to signify: "parkrun is for the community, by the community. When it comes to health and wellbeing, we're not the answer to everything, we're just a very, very small part of the answer. The good thing about us is we have six million people registered and we get out 250,000 people every week. We have an audience that is significant, and as a result what we do is significant. We want to support and be supported in helping people be the best they can be." MF

Words Kieran Devlin Photography parkrun

MORE THAN JUST A RUN

PARKRUN RECENTLY RELEASED THE RESULTS OF AN INDEPENDENT SURVEY CONDUCTED BY SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY'S ADVANCED WELLBEING RESEARCH CENTRE. THE SURVEY WAS SENT TO ALL REGISTERED PARKRUNNERS OVER THE AGE OF 16 DURING OCTOBER 2018, RESULTING IN 60,694 SURVEY RETURNS AND 11 MILLION ANSWERS TO 47 QUESTIONS – HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE FINDINGS

91%
of all respondents reported a sense of personal achievement.

89%
reported improvements to their fitness.

85%
reported improvements to their physical health.

69%
reported improvements to their mental health.

79%
reported improvements to their happiness.

LEARNING THE ROPES

DOMINIC BLISS MEETS THE LUCHA LIBRE WRESTLERS BRINGING A TASTE OF MEXICO TO THE EAST END

"Do you like the sound of broken bones, torn tendons and buff men in small pants squealing like stuck pigs?"

The master of ceremonies at London wrestling show Lucha Britannia leaves his audience members in little doubt what to expect from their evening's entertainment. Already, four wrestlers – El Piranha, Ophidian, Dark Britannico and Illusionisto – have occupied the ring, and are hell bent on knocking seven bells out of each other, to the delight of the 120-strong crowd, all baying for blood.

There seems to be some kind of storyline behind the action, although it's not always clear who is on whose team. No matter though: as a spectacle of combat, athleticism and acrobatics, this Mexican-style wrestling match is brilliant entertainment.

The pugilists, in colourful masks and various items of tight-fitting underwear, take turns at battering one another using strikes, flying kicks, jumps, tackles, holds, throws and take-downs. They leap and bounce off the ropes; they somersault onto the mat and each other, with loud slaps and grunts; they spin opponents over the top of their heads; occasionally they end up being thrown out of the ring altogether, landing at the feet of the cheering spectators. Although the individual manoeuvres are rehearsed, there are impromptu elements to each fight. The winners, however, are predetermined.

ELECTRIC EXPERIENCE

The venue for Lucha Britannia is a small arts club beneath the railway arches in Bethnal Green, east London, called Resistance Gallery. On the third Friday of every month, under the supervision of show directors Garry Vanderhorne and Greg Burridge, a troupe of wrestlers puts on a fast-moving, chaotic and often very funny show. '10,000 volts of sexy mayhem' is how the website sells it. 'This is not like anything you have seen before. This is physical theatre, this is immersive, this is not for the faint-hearted, small children or your granny.'

Lucha Britannia is based on a Mexican sport known as lucha libre. Spanish for 'free fight', it's hugely popular in its home country, where loyal fans follow the escapades of their favourite wrestlers (or luchadores). The fights, often supported by massive crowds in enormous arenas, are exhaustingly acrobatic, with the action vaguely following some sort of rehearsed storyline. There are normally four types of wrestler: the tecnicos (or goodies),

"This is physical theatre, this is not for the faint-hearted, small children or your granny"

the rudos (or baddies), the female luchadoras, and the flamboyantly camp exoticos (sometimes dressed in drag). Altogether it makes for a surreal medley of martial arts, circus, acrobatics, slapstick comedy and pantomime.

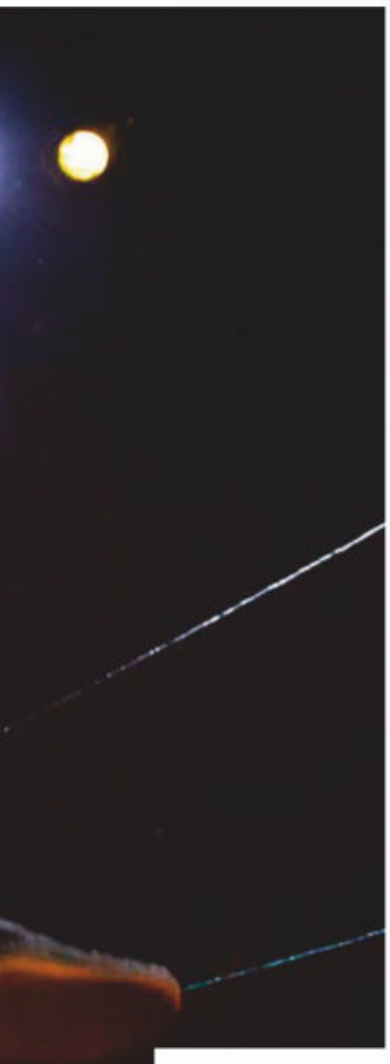
Lucha Britannia, on the other hand, while just as athletic as its Mexican cousin, draws on British wrestling roots as well as Latin American ones.

"When we started doing this, British wrestling wasn't in a good place," explains Vanderhorne. "Wrestling was almost a dirty word; no one admitted to liking it. The quality of wrestling in the UK had taken a downturn since the golden days of the 1970s and 1980s. But I thought, if we took a little of the Mexican element – the masks, the crazy characters, the high-flying acrobatics – and added our own unique, British style, then it would work. And here we are, ten years on."

An eclectic mix of characters watch on from ringside

ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

That British style is alive and kicking in Bethnal Green when *MF* visits on a warm evening in September. A few of the wrestlers look (and sound) like they've stepped straight out of *World Of Sport* in the early 1980s. They could happily occupy a ring alongside legends such as Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks.



Lucha Britannia, for example, has Jerry Bakewell, a cartoonish character from the north of England who sports a Burberry mask, and Dunbar Bakewell, his Irish half-brother. Of all the characters, Fug, with his enormous tummy and podgy limbs, bears the closest resemblance to the original Big Daddy. He's described as "a likeable rogue with a penchant for pub violence and West Ham."

But fat bellies and limbs are the exception here. Most of the wrestlers look fit as butchers' dogs. Vanderhorne explains the unusual combination of strength (for the testing manoeuvres), anaerobic fitness (for the stop-start sprints around the ring), and loud exhalations (wrestlers shout as they give or receive blows) required in this sport. He compares it to pop stars who sing loudly and dance vigorously at the same time.

"It's harder than cardio, because you're using your voice and you're doing exaggerated motions at the same time. So it doesn't matter if you can run a marathon – you might not be able to do three minutes of wrestling. You're working in an anaerobic sense because the oxygen you need to fuel your body is actually leaving your body through your voice. We all have to train for that."

He describes how very fit athletes take their first steps in lucha libre, assuming they have the required athleticism. "You think you're really fit and within one minute of being in a real wrestling match you've got a salt ring around your mouth, and you wish you had a blowhole in your back to breathe, and you're gasping because you don't realise how much oxygen is expelled in making noise."

FIGHTING FIT

That is exactly why Vanderhorne and Burridge insist all wrestlers undergo a lengthy training regime before going anywhere near a real fight. On weekday evenings, at the same venue as the show, they run the London School of Lucha Libre, teaching cardiovascular and core-strength training, wrestling etiquette and manoeuvres, plus break-out sessions in performance, projection and confidence.

Vanderhorne himself is one of the instructors. He says it takes two to four years to graduate from debutant to a level where you could hold your own in a real wrestling match. And since wrestlers are constantly pretending to destroy one another, physical trust is paramount.

"You're lifting another human over your head, or round your body. You don't want to drop that other human and break their neck, so there's a lot of trust," he stresses. He adds that it's often physically harder to feign kicks and strikes than it is to execute the real thing. A further challenge is the theatrical skill required, since every match is accompanied by a storyline (albeit a rather confusing one.) "We sometimes get people who look great, but act like blocks of wood," he says. "If there's no charisma there, it doesn't matter how many flips or moves you do, or how good you look – you're just not connecting with the audience, and it doesn't work."

Fans of WWE can expect something a little different...

Lucha Britannia currently draws on a rotating cast of 24 wrestlers, two or three of them full-time professionals, the others amateurs with day jobs. There are 20 men and four women in the troupe. The oldest wrestler is 40, the youngest 17. The latter goes by the stage name of Dark Britannico. In real life he's Callum Newman, from Romford, in east London. Currently, his day job is on a school farm, but he's planning to turn pro as soon as he hits 18.

The perils of drawing the short straw in scripting week

Photography www.alistairveryard.com

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Already Newman has suffered a major back injury. "I had to have my spine realigned," he explains, delighted to reveal his best war story. "I did this move, got over-confident and f**ked it completely. It was a double flip off the top rope. I completed one flip, then I was coming round for the second, I closed my eyes and landed on my neck. Crunch! The physio said the base of my spine was all twisted. He gave me four or five weeks of manipulation. It's alright now, but every once in a while it stiffens up."

He admits his injury insurance is non-existent. "Apart from the NHS. If you get injured, you go to the doctor and they give you painkillers. I'm stupid. But I want this bad enough, so I keep on going."

Vanderhorne interjects at this point, stressing how his wrestlers are so well trained that the margin of error is very slight. "Obviously mistakes and injuries do happen. But the idea is you train hard enough and long enough that you reduce the risk to a minimum."

One of the more experienced wrestlers, and a full-time pro, is Marduk – real name Malik Waseem, a 25-year-old law graduate from Ruislip in northwest London. He is no stranger to injury either, having shattered the orbit beneath his left eye. It's now reinforced by a metal mesh.

When Marduk and Dark Britannico finish their evening show and come off stage, the adrenaline is still coursing through their veins. Surrounded by admiring fans, they are both visibly pumped up. You can tell they adore this job.

"Wrestling is like nothing else," Marduk says. "It's sport, it's theatre, it's drama, it's emotion, it's cabaret, it's soap opera, it's over-the-top characters in full colour."

Dark Britannico is almost evangelical in his love for wrestling. For him, the combination of combat and extreme fitness is intoxicating. "It's the adrenaline," he says when asked to describe the thrill of it all. "It's another level. It's like being on drugs."

Newman is at the very start of what he hopes will be a long career in the sport. Vanderhorne explains how his young protégé will start off by making a name for himself on the independent circuit, at Lucha Britannia and similar promotions. If he builds up a following, he could earn decent money from appearance fees and merchandise sales.

"But that takes a while," Vanderhorne warns. "Competition in world wrestling is big. You're competing with Japan, North America, South America and emerging territories such as China and Singapore."

Of course, the promotion every ambitious wrestler has their eye on is WWE. Staging 500 events a year, and seen by 36 million TV viewers in over 150 countries, this is the biggest of them all. For 17-year-old Dark Britannico, that's a long way off yet. MF

TO FIND OUT MORE, HEAD TO LUCHABRITANNIA.COM

Acrobatic athleticism meets theatrical performance

RISING STAR

Callum Newman, aka Dark Britannico, is a 17-year-old from Romford in east London. He first discovered wrestling thanks to his granddad Tony Granzi, who wrestled professionally in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, like so many of the other Lucha Britannia characters, his love of the sport was kindled after watching American WWE wrestlers in action on TV.

Nowadays, he hones his manoeuvres three times a week, for three hours each time, at Lucha Britannia training sessions in Bethnal Green. Nearby, he also attends crossfit sessions. Back home in Romford he has a wrestling ring set up in his back garden.

"Here I do a lot of cardio: vaults, rope running, press-ups, burpees and skipping. I also practise flips onto a crash mat. Three or four times a week I go into my shed where I have various weights and a bench to work on different parts of the body. I always finish sessions with pull-ups.

"I also do a lot of bodyweight work with high and low bars. Leading up to a show, I have weights in my room where I do some extra upper-body work. Occasionally, I will also go to a trampoline park to practise flips and tumbling."

ADVERTORIAL

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Don't want to undo all your hard work in the gym for a night on the town? Stay true to your values with Balans, the first hard seltzer to hit the UK

Even the most committed fitness fanatics can't be saints all the time. But taking your foot off the gas from time to time isn't only inevitable, it's to be encouraged; doing so makes you more likely to stick to healthy habits in the long run. However, having a good time doesn't have to mean completely derailing all your hard work, and if you're looking for a lower calorie, on-trend drink that will help you stay on track with your fitness goals, we've got just the thing.

An alcoholic sparkling water with just a hint of fruit flavour, Balans (Swedish for 'balance') is the first hard seltzer to launch in the UK – a drinks trend that is currently huge in the US and looking set to rise. After all, hard seltzer offers all the refreshment of a cold beer, minus the calories (and bloat).

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Balans is currently available at Asda and Tesco stores nationwide, priced at £1.70 per 250ml can or £5 for four. For more information, check out balansdrinks.com

Self-improvement DELUSION

Matt Ayres asks whether striving for happiness through endless self-help books, apps and podcasts can actually have an adverse effect on our sense of wellbeing

At the beginning of 2019, I decided it would be the best year of my life.

With a list of New Year's resolutions nearly as long as the half marathon I'd be signing up for, I set about making 'Operation Self-Improvement' a reality.

Meditation apps were downloaded and motivational podcasts were neatly arranged into playlists, ready to spur me on during 6am runs in the wintry drizzle. Bestselling self-help books were bunged haphazardly into my Amazon basket – a bulging library I was certain would change my perspective on my career, health and life in general.

I'd be learning a language, naturally (Japanese couldn't be that hard, could it?), and while I was at it, why not turn the average two-bedroom house I'd recently bought with my girlfriend into the dream home we'd been planning?

Call it post-Christmas optimism or new year naivety, but I felt genuinely psyched up to transform my life in the way that so many lifestyle gurus had promised was possible. I just had to make a bit more time, work a little harder and stay focused on making good things happen.

NEW YEAR, NEW YOU?

Of course, I knew I wasn't the only person setting aspirational goals as 2019 rolled around. I also knew that the statistics for succeeding with New Year's resolutions were less than promising. Data by fitness app Strava suggests that by 12 January each year, most of us have already failed to keep our resolutions. Elsewhere, a study undertaken by the University of Scranton shows that only around eight per cent of people manage to achieve the goals they set for themselves at the start of the year.

Somehow these figures didn't put me off as I began my own self-improvement journey in the first month of 2019. And while I jogged and journaled my way through January, I was struck by how many other people seemed to be doing the same. »

Every other Instagram post I scrolled past showed a friend at the gym, an acquaintance discussing their healthy new morning routine or an inspiring personal essay about the importance of following your dreams. Since when did we all become so obsessed with bettering ourselves?

"Self-improvement is deeply embedded in many cultures, including the British one," says Niels Eék, psychologist and co-founder of personal development app Remente. "We're surrounded by advertising and social media that offers us a highly selective and frequently unrealistic image of what the world looks like. By comparing ourselves with these distortions, we feed our perfectionist tendencies."

On its surface, self-improvement might seem like a good way to make positive changes in our lives and feel happier. Yet for many, the constant pursuit of personal growth appears to be having the opposite effect.

We may not have as much power over our lives as we think we do. Money, health, social status and personal circumstances are often affected by forces outside our control. But when the world conspires against the optimistic plans we've made, it can still feel like a personal failure.

"The self-improvement industry places immense pressure on us to be perfect," suggests behaviour-change psychologist Dr Aria Campbell-Danesh. "We face unhelpful expectations to 'have it all': to look perfect at all ages, to be perfect partners, perfect parents and to have successful careers.

"Striving to reach extreme and unattainable standards can have a powerful knock-on effect on our self-esteem. When we inevitably fall short of these standards, we feel inadequate."

WHAT'S 'APPENING?

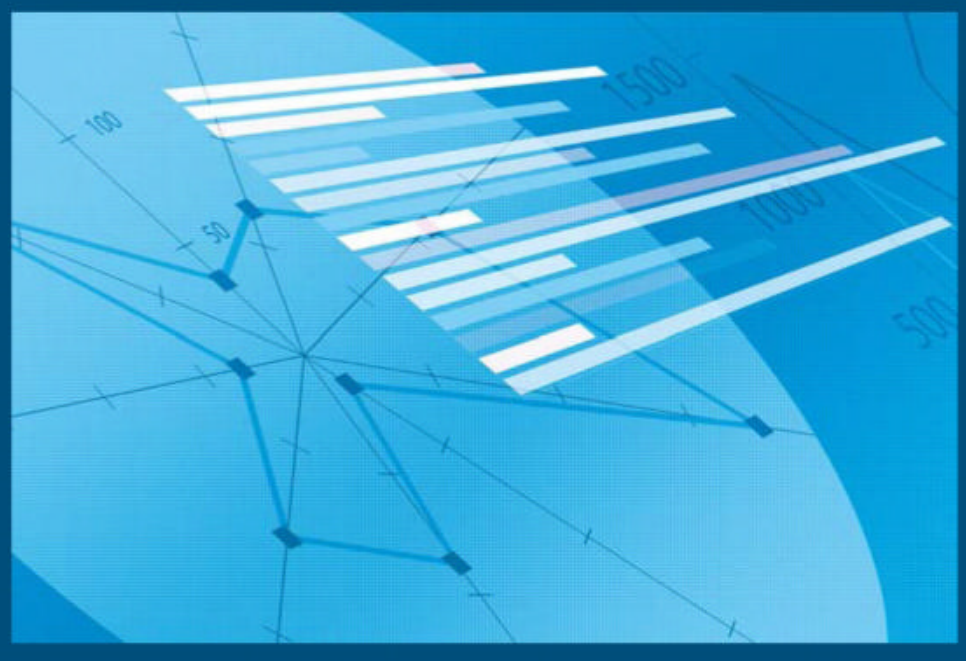
Our collective obsession with social media appears to be amplifying the problem. A study by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania found that people who reduce their social media activity to a maximum of 30 minutes per day feel happier, with lower reported levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness.

Unfortunately, most of us are more addicted to these apps than ever. Ninety per cent of millennials are active social media users. The heaviest users spend approximately 225 minutes (3.75 hours) on their phones every day, touching their screens around 5,427 times in the same period.

Comparing ourselves to the people we follow online means we frequently fail to live up to the unrealistic expectations we set for ourselves, which makes us unhappy. We want to change things, so we set ourselves new (often unrealistic) goals to improve. And when these plans fail, the vicious cycle of so-called self-improvement starts all over again.

It's not just our phones and social media habits that have brought about our ongoing obsession with personal growth. In fact, self-improvement dates back to long before we were all glued to our screens.

The first book of its kind, *Self-help*, by Samuel Smiles, was published in 1859. Now considered the blueprint for a genre that's evolved into a $10 billion industry, Smiles' book outsold Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* the year it was released, and quickly popularised the notion of self-improvement.



PURSUIT OF PERFECT

The self-improvement industry is expected to be worth $13 billion dollars by 2022.

Approximately 3 million self-help books are sold in the UK each year.

Ninety-four per cent of millennials commit to personal improvement goals each year.

The most popular self-care apps have been growing by a rate of around 40 per cent year-on-year.

According to its latest survey, 53,000 life coaches are registered with the International Coach Federation (compared to 17,000 in 2013).

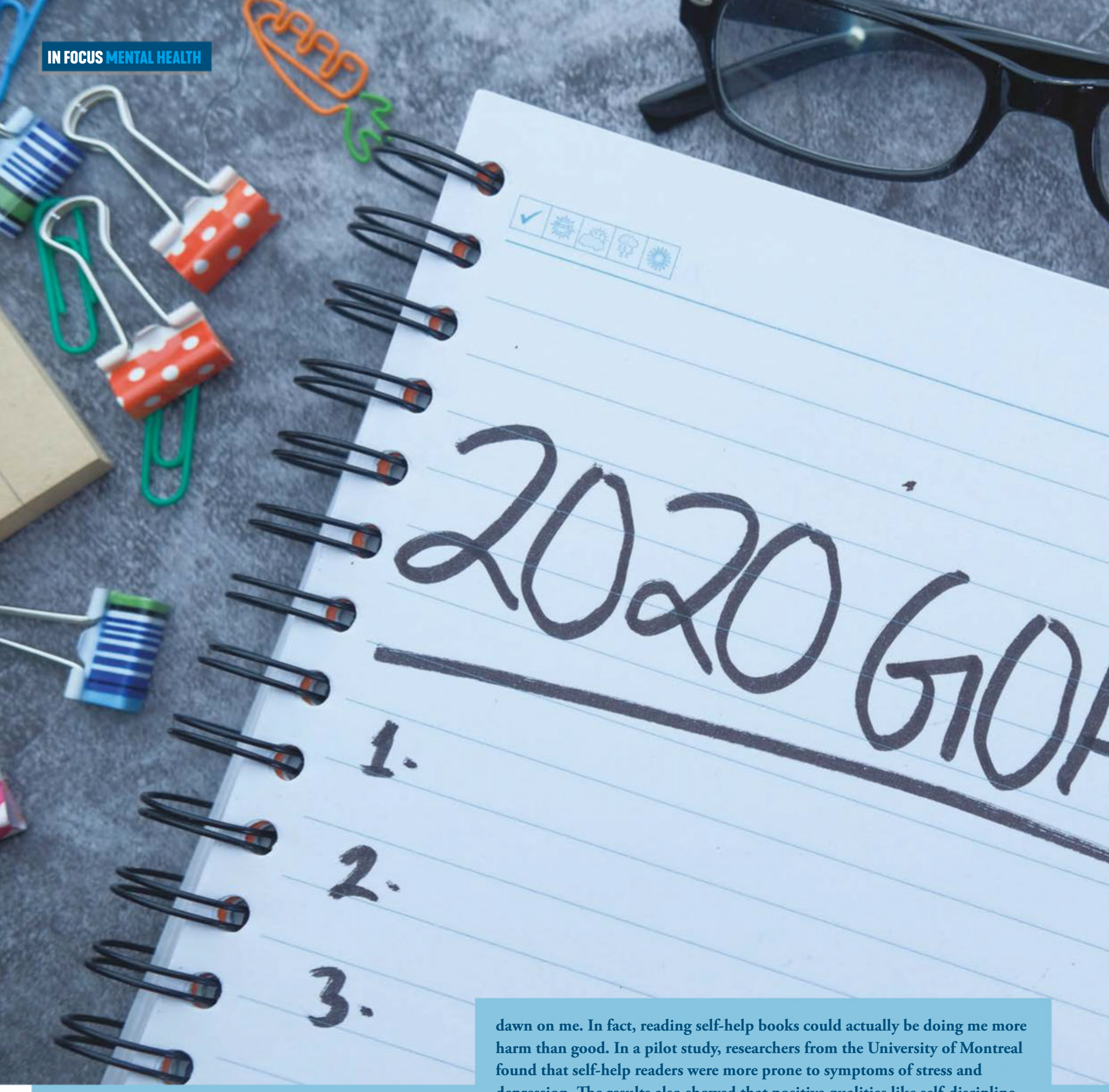
Books including Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends and Influence People* and Napoleon Hill's *Think And Grow Rich* propelled the self-help movement to new heights throughout the 20th century. More recently, Tony Robbins' *Awaken The Giant Within* and Tim Ferriss' *The 4-Hour Work Week* have won their authors cult-like followings. Through TED Talks, podcasts, online courses and exotic life transformation retreats, the ideas proposed by self-help's biggest names have been enthusiastically guzzled up by an army of online consumers.

You only need to visit your nearest bookshop to see how popular self-help is today. From Fearne Cotton to Russell Brand, everyone seems to have a book extolling the values of personal development, authenticity and #selflove. Popularised Scandinavian concepts of wellbeing like 'hygge' and 'lagom' have entered our everyday vocabulary. Mindfulness and meditation have become big business, too – meditation app Headspace has more than 31 million people using its platform, and the company is currently valued at over $100 million.

THE PAIN OF PROGRESS

There's no doubt that books, podcasts and apps were a motivator for me as I went about my own year of self-improvement. A voice in your ear or words on a page can make you feel like the new habits you're forging are real and lasting. But with so many celebrities and influencers urging you to follow their particular approach to personal development, the constant pressure to improve can also be mentally draining.

"Putting too much pressure on yourself to change and improve can »



» become obsessive," says cognitive behaviour therapist Claudia Prothero, whose work involves helping people to overcome the unhelpful aspects of perfectionism. "There is a temptation to keep moving the bar higher, not stopping to celebrate successes. The process then becomes about finding faults, focusing on areas we believe we are lacking in."

I can definitely relate. By the time March 2019 rolled around, my new and improved life was getting tiresome. Trying so hard to be happy and successful was exhausting. I didn't feel better. In fact, while baby animals and blooming flowers joyfully signalled spring's arrival, all I could think about was how little I'd achieved, and how much further I had to go.

The realisation that self help might not be the life-changing panacea its authors proclaim was beginning to dawn on me. In fact, reading self-help books could actually be doing me more harm than good. In a pilot study, researchers from the University of Montreal found that self-help readers were more prone to symptoms of stress and depression. The results also showed that positive qualities like self-discipline, emotional stability and self-esteem were not being improved by reading self-help books.

Psychologist Iris Mauss suggests that the more we pursue our own happiness, the less likely we are to achieve it. In a controlled study, Mauss asked a group of participants to read an article highlighting the importance and benefits of happiness. By the end of the test, people who had read the article felt more isolated, disconnected and dissatisfied than those who hadn't, suggesting that valuing happiness may be a self-defeating exercise.

If this is the case, it's no wonder my pursuit of self-improvement was getting me nowhere: by actively striving to become happier, I was paradoxically shooting myself in the foot. Perhaps the key to being happier is to simply appreciate what we have, rather than constantly looking for more.

"When we start with gratitude, we appreciate what we have in this moment," agrees Dr Aria Campbell-Danesh. "We find joy in our lives right now. We can still move towards our goals, without tying our happiness to them. The journey becomes more enjoyable."

REAL LIFE GETS IN THE WAY

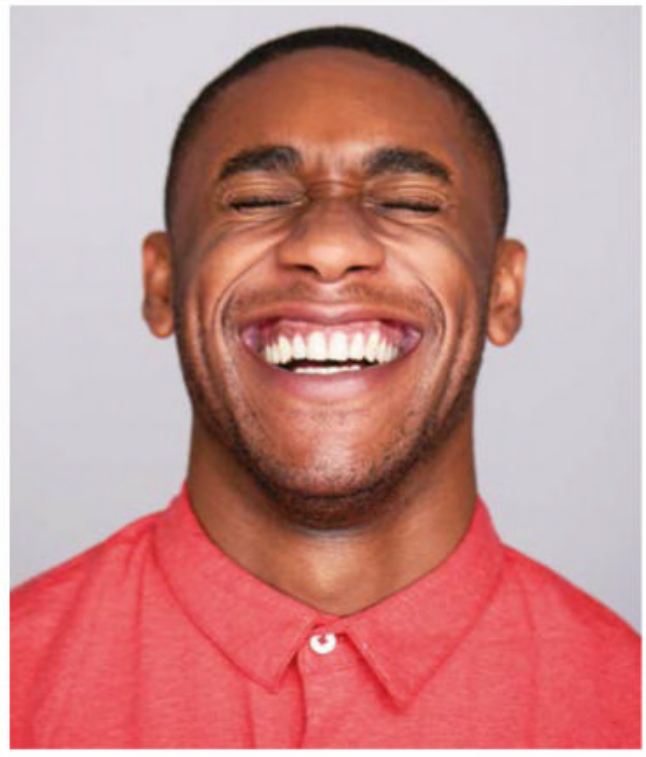
Unsurprisingly, my starry-eyed idea of a perfect year didn't pan out. 2019 ended up being a mixed bag, with more disappointments than successes and a constant series of reminders that I was failing to live up to the lofty goals I'd set for myself.

The house I live in isn't nearly as Pinterest-worthy as I'd like it to be. I only know a handful of Japanese phrases, and my daily meditation ritual has made way for video games and Netflix. Some guru I'd make.

What I've learned is that it's OK to be content with what you have, and to appreciate the little things that make life good. The highlights of my year ended up being morning coffee dates with my girlfriend, evenings spent laughing over beers with friends, and woodland runs listening to my favourite music.

I also managed to finish that half marathon I'd signed up for in January. So maybe it's OK to make one or two resolutions for 2020. Just don't expect to change your whole life in a single year.

KEYS TO CONTENTMENT



START SMALL

"Trying to change too much too quickly is a mistake," says Dr Aria Campbell-Danesh, psychologist and author of *A Mindful Year*. "Studies into the psychology of habits show that the simpler the action, the quicker it becomes second nature. So start small, wherever you are, to bring more harmony into your life."

EXPECT SETBACKS

"Reward yourself for taking action, even if things don't turn out perfectly," says Niels Eék, psychologist and co-founder of personal development app Remente. "It is vital to break the cycle of striving for self-improvement and perfection. Try this by doing things that are a little out of your comfort zone, and reflect on the outcome of completing tasks that you're unable to do perfectly."

APPRECIATE THE PRESENT

"Spend time doing simple activities that make you feel calm and happy in the here and now," says Claudia Prothero, cognitive behaviour therapist. "Make happiness something you can recognise in your current life, rather than something you are constantly striving for and working towards."

Photography Getty Images

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RARE CONDITIONS COMMON PROBLEMS

Despite the term, around three million people in the UK are afflicted by some form of rare disease. With symptoms often hidden from view, sufferers can be left feeling isolated with a lack of support. Jamie Broadway, who himself suffers from a rare visual defect, shines a light on the daily challenges faced by those living with rare diseases, and explains why exercise isn't always the magic cure »

It all started with a slight shimmer in the corner of my left eye: a sensation so strange that it was difficult to even describe it to the optometrist. They thought I was making it up. After all, everything looked fine. Even the local hospital disregarded it. "There's nothing wrong with you, it's a visual migraine," I was told repeatedly. But it wasn't.

A year and a half later, following the complete loss of my peripheral vision, a misdiagnosis, an MRI scan and ocular electrophysiological testing, I was eventually diagnosed with AZOOR (Acute Zonal Occult Outer Retinopathy) in my left eye: a rare retinal inflammation that causes the sufferer to see constant flashing lights. It gradually robs the retina of its ability to send messages back to the brain, but on the surface there doesn't seem to be any issues; the retina looks healthy and functional – hence the word 'Occult' in AZOOR.

The initial prognosis sounded positive. One consultant claimed it was a condition which eventually stabilises after a few years. However, in 2015, eight years after the initial symptoms and several doctors later, the condition intensified. It started depriving me of visual acuity and bulldozed my mental health.

By 2016, I was having sleepless nights and spending whole days obsessing over my eye. The constant flashing lights, whether my eyes were open or closed, meant that it was all I could think of and see – with no escape. Such a small piece of human tissue like the retina was now having a gargantuan toll on my emotional wellbeing.

DAILY STRUGGLE

Last year, for the first time ever, a comprehensive survey was conducted by Rare Disease UK into how rare conditions can impact mental wellbeing. The results were staggering: 95 per cent of rare disease sufferers have felt anxious; 90 per cent have felt low; 88 per cent have felt emotionally exhausted. The common symptom behind all rare diseases, it seems, is poor mental health.

Thirty-eight-year-old Kehinde Salami can vouch for that. When he was 24, he was diagnosed with sickle cell disease, a hereditary conditions that means his red blood cells have an unusual crescent moon shape. Being sticky, the cells clump together and can block blood vessels in what is known as a sickle cell crisis. This manifests itself as excruciating pain and eventually ends in organ failure and, ultimately, death. "I could potentially die any day," says Salami. "That is how unpredictable sickle cell is."

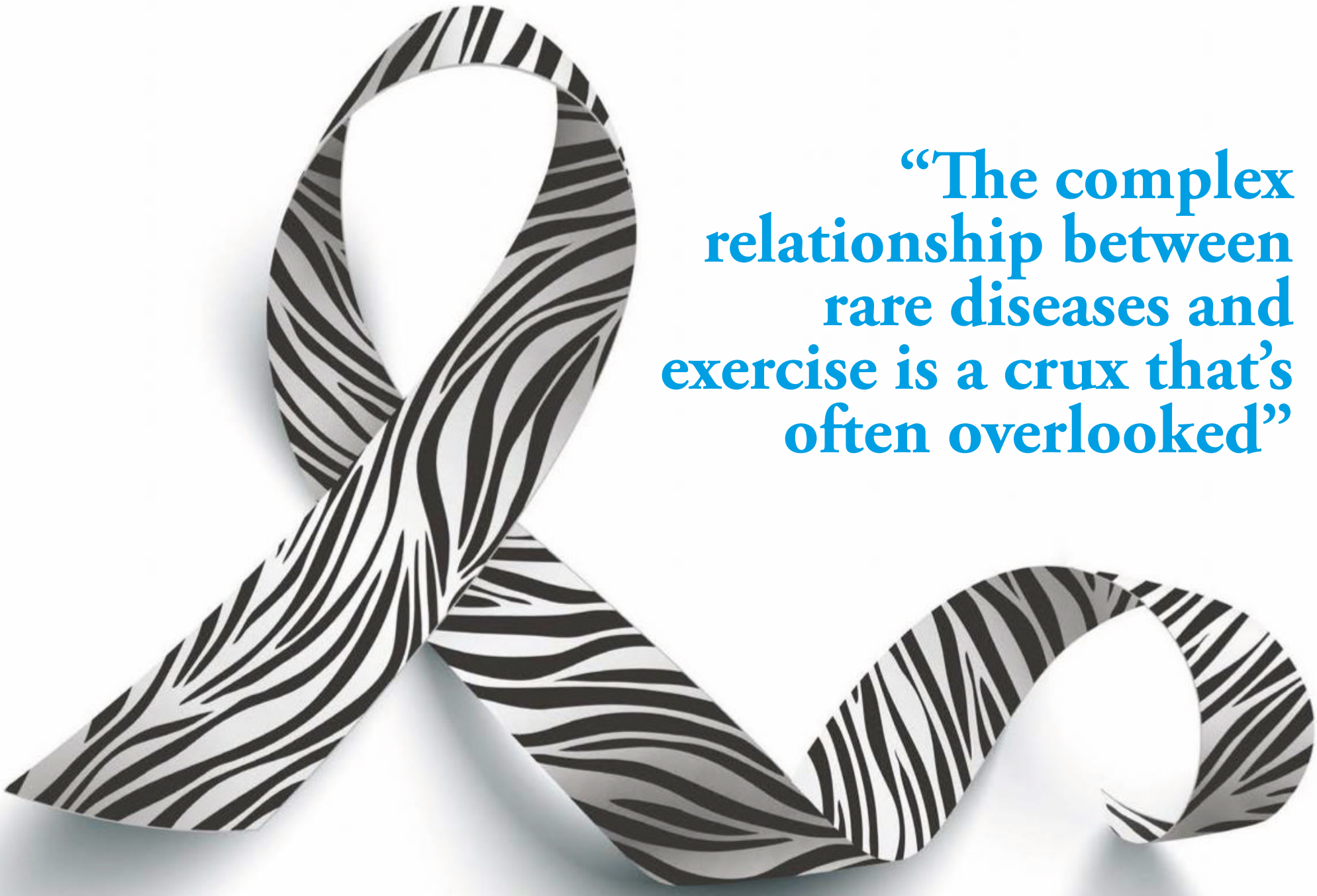
It is the unpredictability of rare diseases that gives rise to anxiety. However, as Salami can affirm, emotional support is often hard to come by: "I was in a hospital and even though I was being treated for my physical pain, I was then discharged and had to deal with the mental aspects of sickle cell by myself. I didn't get any referrals. I didn't get any counselling. I was at home waiting for another sickle cell crisis to hit."

Dr Lucy Davidson, a counselling psychologist in London who specialises in complex health conditions, says that when suffering from a rare condition, "the focus is almost always on the physical impact" and not on the mental side, which becomes "peripheral". She also talks about rare disease sufferers feeling isolated, saying that as "no one can identify with what you're going through, there's complete isolation."

For Salami, the toxic mix of isolation, unpredictability and lack of emotional support eventually became too much and after a severe sickle cell crisis on his retina in which he lost his sight, he took an overdose of painkillers in an attempt to end it all. He lived to tell the tale, but his experience is a stark reminder of the emotional toll rare diseases can take.

According to Rare Diseases UK, 36 per cent of rare disease patients experience suicidal thoughts. As Gemma Harris, a counsellor and therapist who also suffers from multiple sclerosis (MS) states, "Suicide ideation is common for these people due to the high levels of stress and isolation, and sometimes as a way of taking control of their lives. It is important that professional help is sought to help them deal with these feelings."

Dozens of colourful balloons are released into the sky in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 29 February – the official International Rare Disease Day



"The complex relationship between rare diseases and exercise is a crux that's often overlooked"

HIGH ALERT

Luke Pembroke, 25, suffers from haemophilia B: a rare genetic bleeding disorder whereby his blood fails to clot due to the lack of a protein called 'factor IX'. He admits that dealing with the mental health aspect of living with a rare disease, particularly depression, is something he'll probably always have to deal with. "I have good days and bad days," he says, although compared to five years ago, "there are generally more good ones than bad ones."

Haemophilia B means that any trauma injury can lead to internal bleeding in Pembroke's joints. When this happens repeatedly in the same joint, it then becomes known as a target joint, leading to the onset of osteoarthritis and muscle atrophy. Therefore, to prevent the bleeding, he injects himself with clotting factor up to three times a week – something he had to learn to do at the age of seven.

He describes himself as always being on a heightened sense of alert, constantly listening to his body for any signs of internal bleeding. He says that the challenge is identifying whether he's suffering from arthritic pain or internal bleeding, as the symptoms are similar: swelling, heat, loss of range of motion, sharp jabbing pains.

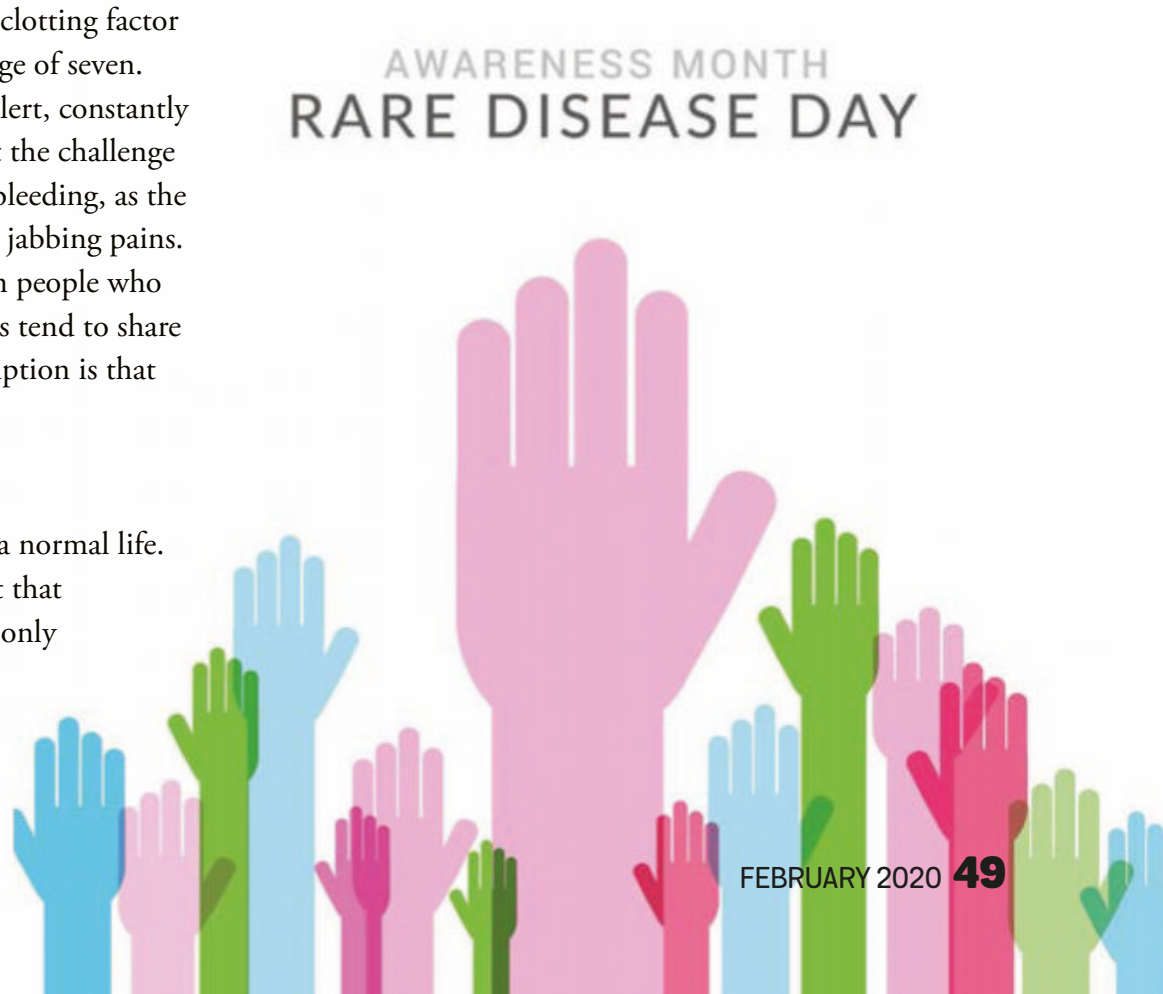
Prophesising the next doomsday event is also pretty common in people who suffer from rare diseases. Dr Davidson says that rare disease sufferers tend to share a sense of "hypervigilance and catastrophising." She says "the assumption is that something bad is bound to happen."

FRAUGHT FITNESS

For Pembroke, haemophilia has at times affected his ability to lead a normal life. He says that when he was younger, it was difficult for him to accept that he shouldn't take part in any contact sports. And he admits that he only truly stopped playing football when someone ran across his groin by accident during a friendly match at university. This led to a potentially life-threatening and excruciating pelvic muscle bleed.

The complex relationship between rare diseases and exercise is a crux that's often overlooked. For Prembroke, the relationship is "multi-layered". He says that with haemophilia, exercise was traditionally discouraged due to the potential for bleeds. However, with the rise of preventative treatment and specialist physiotherapy, it has been encouraged as stronger muscles provide joints with more protection and stability.

When it comes to rare conditions and exercise, a lot



of adaptation can be required, which people don't realise. Pembroke, for example, has to limit himself to 5k runs and load up on clotting factor on the days of his runs to prevent bleeds. Unfortunately, though, there's an overemphasis on huge feats of athleticism – running marathons and so on – which has the effect of simplifying the difficulties of living with rare diseases.

Likewise, there's always talk of exercise as a miracle cure for poor mental health. However, for anyone living with a rare condition, this oversimplified link can be devastatingly problematic.

For Salami, exercise actually compounded his state of depression, because it highlighted his loss of fitness after the sickle cell crises started. "I realised that I couldn't lift as much, I couldn't run as fast, I couldn't do as many reps. I hated going to the gym because I was trying to outperform my previous self."

He says he would look back over old photos of himself where he was bigger and feel a sense of guilt. Personal trainers would also tell him that he wasn't pushing hard enough, completely disregarding his condition. He became paranoid about having a crisis episode while at the gym and ultimately stopped going. It took him a long time to build up the confidence to return. For Salami, going to the gym and trying to live up to societal norms of fitness and his previous self didn't help his mental health at all, it merely worsened it.

Personally speaking, people have repeatedly prescribed yoga as a natural wonder drug for anxiety. However, being

"The key is to listen – truly listen – to other people's realities, and accept that exercise isn't always a one-size-fits-all solution to mental and physical health"

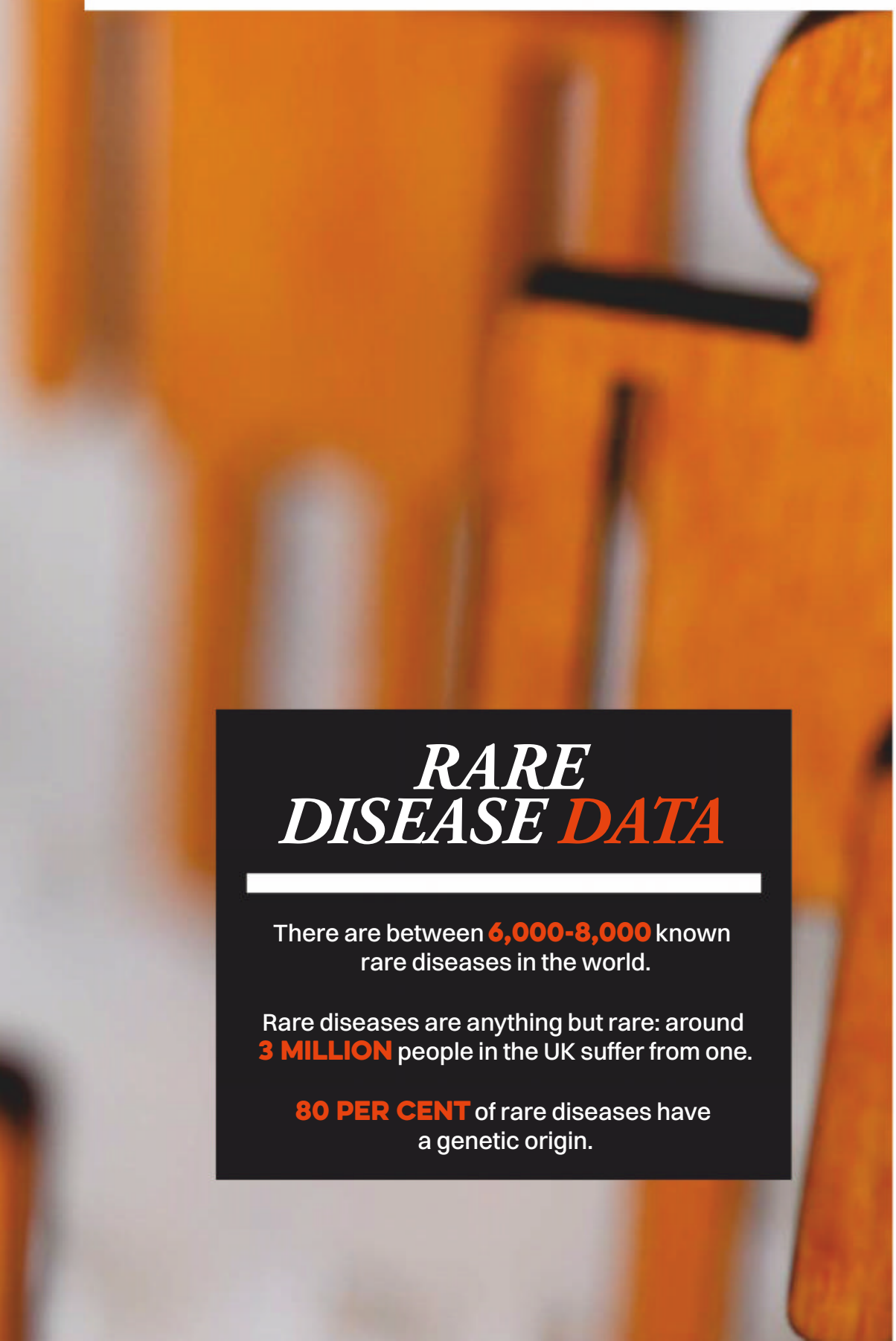
stationary and closing my eyes actually feeds into my anxiety, as I end up seeing the AZOOR. Likewise, in any form of intense exercise, my eye can erupt into what I can only describe as an electric storm racing across my retina. For me, exercise is never free from the lights or intrusive thoughts.

This is not to in any way diminish the importance of exercise as a force for maintaining both physical fitness and mental health. Nor is it to say that yoga doesn't help people regulate stress and anxiety. But with rare diseases, the same rules rarely apply.

COMBATING ISOLATION

The key is to listen – truly listen – to other people's realities, and accept that exercise isn't always a one-size-fits-all solution to mental and physical health. With regards to looking after the mental health aspects of living with rare diseases, Gemma Harris says addressing the isolation is essential. She says it's about finding people you can talk to and "trying to express how you feel. Blogging, shouting, singing – any way to express how you're feeling."

Pembroke has done just that: @TheClotThickens is his social media platform where he recounts his experiences of haemophilia. Similarly, Salami set up SickleKan (sicklekan.com), a charity to provide mental support to others with sickle cell disease. He explains, "I thought, if I'm not going to get the support, I will create my own platform to offer advice and make sure others have all the help they need." MF



RARE DISEASE DATA

There are between **6,000-8,000** known rare diseases in the world.

Rare diseases are anything but rare: around **3 MILLION** people in the UK suffer from one.

80 PER CENT of rare diseases have a genetic origin.

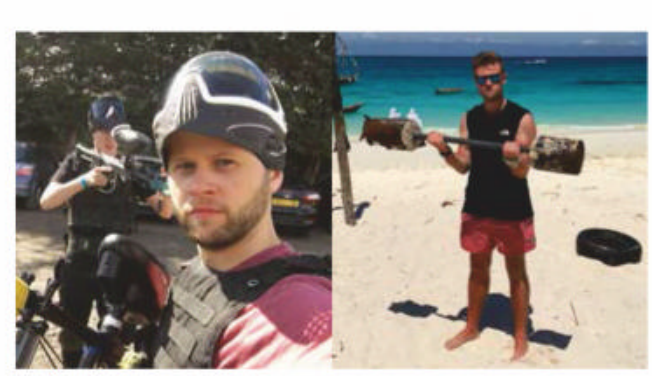
FINDING A WAY

KEHINDE SALAMI, LUKE PEMBROKE AND JAMIE BROADWAY ON THE FORMS OF FITNESS THAT WORK BEST FOR THEM

KEHINDE SALAMI

Light weight training with high reps.

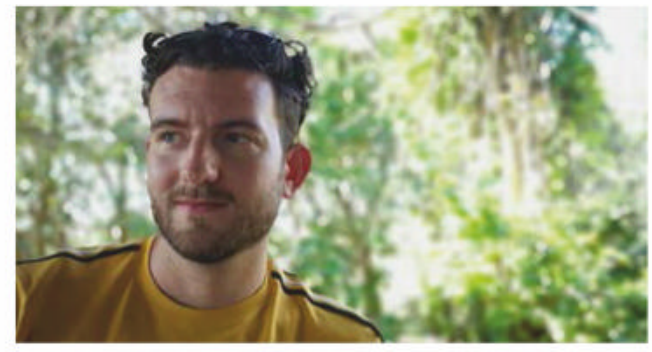
"I'm back at the gym training, but I had to build up my confidence. I can still enjoy workouts with lighter weights but with more reps, and I will still get the benefits."



LUKE PEMBROKE

Running and tournament paintball.

"Nothing quite beats running outside. I limit myself to 5k runs: any more than that and I start to feel my ankles flare up due to the arthritis."



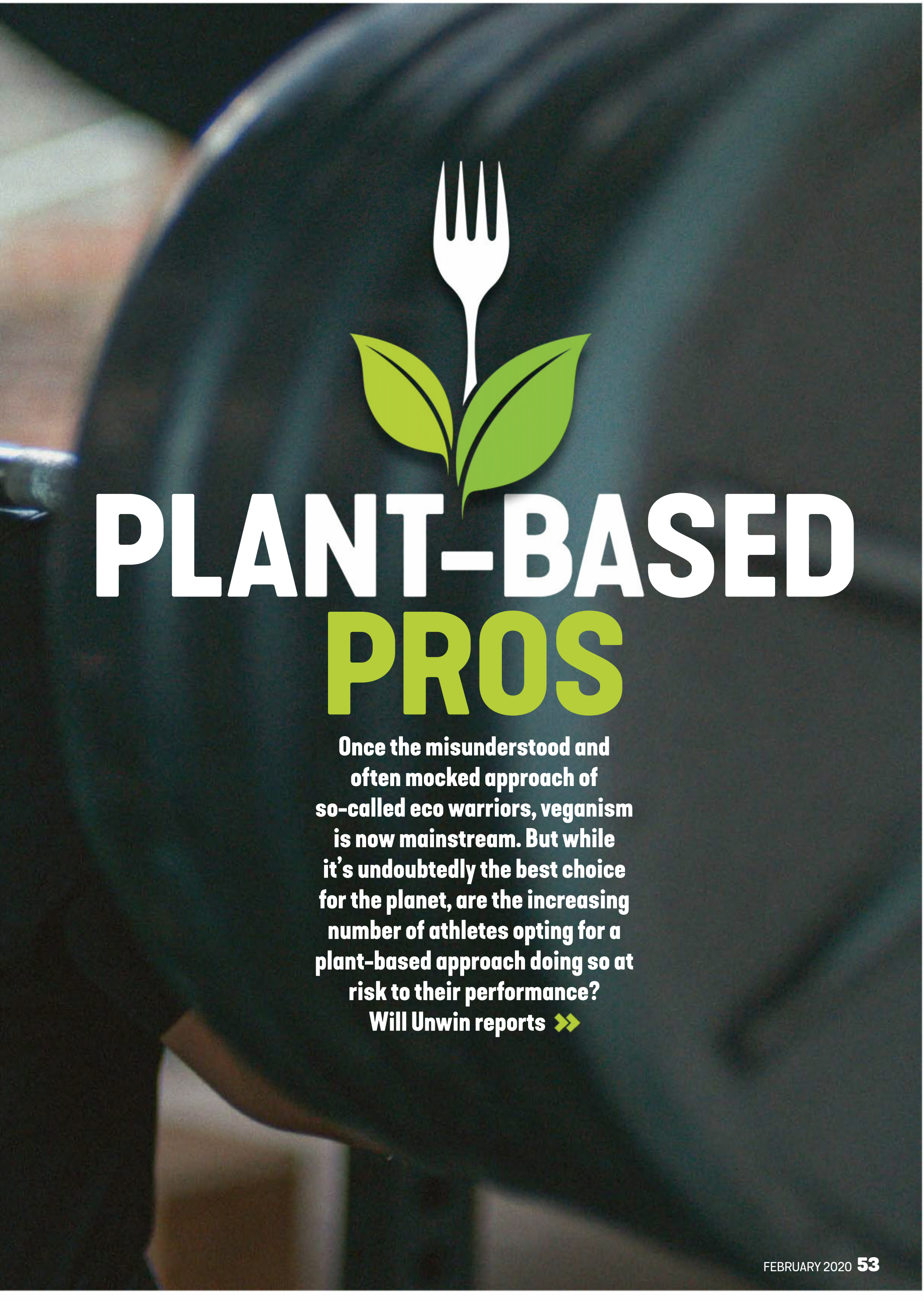
JAMIE BROADWAY

Les Mills group classes.

"As the group classes tend to be fast-paced and held in darker rooms with low-level lighting, at present they can help distract me from the flashing lights on my retina."

Photography Shutterstock

Patrik Baboumian is one of the strongest men on the planet. He's also a vegan



PLANT-BASED PROS

Once the misunderstood and often mocked approach of so-called eco warriors, veganism is now mainstream. But while it's undoubtedly the best choice for the planet, are the increasing number of athletes opting for a plant-based approach doing so at risk to their performance? Will Unwin reports »

While there are various reasons to remove, or at least cut down on, meat and other animal products, an increasing number of athletes are doing so for performance purposes alone. However, individual needs vary from sport to sport.

A cyclist, for example, needs an average of 6,071 calories per day on a ride, while a footballer burns around a third of that during a 90-minute match. Regardless of diet, getting the requisite energy and nutrients can be a tricky business, so cutting off numerous foods limits options, meaning careful planning and research is key.

Foregoing meat and dairy can be a tough decision for anyone, but for an athlete with performances on the line, it's a potentially career-changing move. Professional cyclist Adam Hansen, who has taken part in 29 Grand Tours, was dairy-free for the majority of his life, but he's only recently made the step to cut out fish as well.

"I actually had a blood test done and my goal was to improve every marker," he explains. "I went through everything, and while I had good results I just wanted to improve even more. I worked with a doctor to cut out certain food groups. I had damaging chemicals like mercury in my system, which I found out was from seafood. So as I began cutting things out I took a back step and thought, holy moly...I'm a vegan! Then, of course, looking into it more you find out the ethical side of it and it's very hard to turn a blind eye."

Meanwhile, footballer Joan Román, who previously played for Manchester City and Barcelona, was influenced by a teammate to move on from meat. "We researched, we read articles, we watched documentaries," he says. "I started off by taking out milk and dairy, because it was already affecting my digestion a little bit and from there I started to feel much better, so then I started trying to not eat red meat. After that I took all the meat out and in the end I took the fish and the eggs out, too.

"The main reason was because of health and how I was feeling, but in the end I was aware of how the meat and dairy industry work, how they treat animals

"As I began cutting things out I took a back step and thought, holy moly...I'm a vegan!"

Pro Australian cyclist Adam Hansen stumbled upon veganism after tests to improve his performance showed it was the best option

and how it affects the environment, and it all clicked in my head. I couldn't look back after that."

INFORMED DECISION

That said, without their fine-tuned physiques and ability to perform under pressure, athletes wouldn't be athletes, so changing winning formulas is a risky move. Food is fuel for any sportsman, and putting in the wrong stuff will have a negative impact on livelihoods and careers. In short, the details matter. "You need to take care of what you eat and how you eat," says Román. "As sportsmen we burn more energy and put our bodies through more stress than normal people, so we need to take care."

Performance nutritionist James Sinclair – himself a former Premier League footballer – says honest self-assessment is essential before making big changes: "If a footballer, for example, was to come to me with the idea of becoming a vegan, first I would ask their reasons for the change, what their goals are, what they're looking at achieving while switching to a plant-based diet and why they believe that going vegan is right for them. From these simple questions, I can get a better idea of whether it's a sensible choice, from a purely performance perspective, or not."

Sinclair continues: "For footballers, I would advise hesitancy implementing such a change during the course of the season. Long-term monitoring would be necessary to see if the player develops any nutrient deficiencies, which can be combated with WADA and Informed Sport-approved supplements."

For all the athletes *MF* spoke to, however, the impact of going green was tangible. All say they not only noticed marked improvement in performance, but quicker recovery from both training and injury, too.

POWER PLANTS

Patrik Baboumian is an international strongman competitor who appears in the recent pro-vegan film *The Game Changers*, which attempts to show the benefits of a plant-based diet for athletic performance.

At first, though, Baboumian chose veganism for ethical reasons: "When I made the decision I wasn't expecting anything to happen to my training, I was probably expecting my performances to decrease as I was brought up with the idea that you need animal protein to build up muscle and strength."

But Baboumian has held five world strength records during his career – all while a vegan. "What actually happened was the opposite: I increased size and strength. I put that down to the fact meat puts a huge toll on the digestive system. When you get rid of the meat in your diet it increases your appetite and you eat the right things. I ended up giving my body more calories – more fuel – and if you give it good fuel, you're going to reach new heights."

It's true, though, that many key nutrients are found mainly in meat and dairy. For example, creatine, vitamin

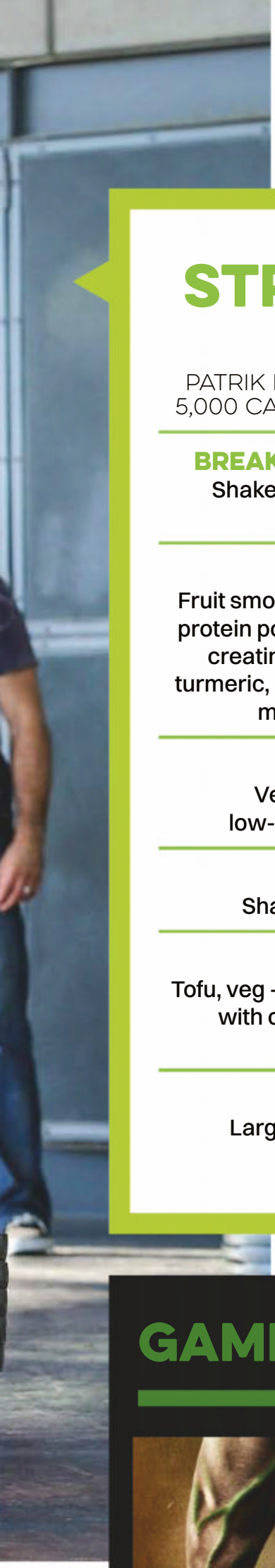
German strongman Patrik Baboumian says he can lift more and recover quicker since switching to a plant-based diet

Joan Román in action for Greek club Panetolikos. The Spanish winger has been vegan for years after an old teammate recommended going green

B12 and omega-3 acids. "B12 is a vital micronutrient that plays a specific role in the synthesis of DNA," explains Sinclair. "As the only natural source of vitamin B12 can be found in animal and dairy products, it is estimated that about 50 per cent of vegans are vitamin B12 deficient. This can result in pernicious anaemia, which has detrimental effects on immune function." Fortunately, the solution is simple: regular supplementation with B12 tablets.

ALL IN THE HEAD?

As well as the immediate impact on his performance, Hansen thinks the plant-based lifestyle extended his cycling career. The Australian rode the 2019 Tour de France, finishing 68th, at the ripe old age of 38. "I really feel I have



STRONGMAN DIET

PATRIK BABOUMIAN REVEALS HIS 5,000 CALORIE-A-DAY EATING PLAN

BREAKFAST (PRE-WORKOUT)
Shake – 80g protein, 5g creatine, 3g beta-alanine.

POST-WORKOUT
Fruit smoothie with frozen fruit, berries, protein power, glutamine, beta-alanine, creatine, powdered dried greens, turmeric, cinammon, BCAA, orange and mango juice, and water.

LUNCH
Vegan sausages, falafel, low-fat oven fries, grilled veg.

SNACK
Shake – 50g protein, 5g fat.

DINNER
Tofu, veg – including courgette flavoured with curry paste to provide fat – and potatoes.

SNACK
Large serving of peanuts and a protein smoothie.

GAMECHANGERS

'Directed by Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker Louie Psihoyos, *The Game Changers* tells the story of James Wilks — elite Special Forces trainer and The Ultimate Fighter winner — as he travels the world on a quest to uncover the optimal diet for human performance.'
Watch it now on Netflix.

Photography Getty Images

added years to my life, and that was one of my goals," he says. "Not to just live longer, but to live younger longer. As for my racing years, I'm confident it will add many seasons to my career."

Again, though, Sinclair offers a slightly more sceptical take. He thinks the positive effects of changing to a plant-based diet could be mental rather than physical. "I believe that there would be placebo effect," he says. "It's all about context, and firstly you would have to consider what the individual's previous diet consisted of: perhaps they were consuming a diet that was low in nutrients and lacking a variety of fresh seasonal fruit and vegetables. In that instance, switching to a diet with increased fresh produce is going to give you an immediate sense of improved health."

On the subject of placebo, while there is clear evidence that removing meat can lower inflammation in muscles, there's no solid research to suggest a plant-based diet repairs injuries quicker. But Baboumian begs to differ. "My body," he says, "is able to better recover from injury and those mini-traumas you have as a basic part of your training process. The recovery is definitely much more efficient than before I went vegan. And that's not just compared to my meat-eating days, but also my days as a vegetarian. My recovery is way better now.

"I used to be forced to take painkillers, but when I went vegan I was able to completely stop them"

"I used to be forced to take painkillers from time to time, and I know other strongman competitors do the same. That's because your body is under so much pressure, stress and trauma. When I went vegan, I was able to completely lose the painkillers."

There is no medical evidence to support his belief the diet alone has allowed him to wean himself off painkillers, but even if the effects are indeed largely placebo, that is not to discredit them. If you feel better for it – even if the change is mental rather than physiological – that's no less beneficial.

GREEN GAINS

The key for anyone looking to remove meat and dairy entirely is to fully research what is needed for a balanced vegan diet. "When you switch to a vegan lifestyle, especially as an athlete," says Joan Román, "you need to know the impact of what you eat and understand that your food can affect every aspect of performance."

The three sportsmen we spoke to all acknowledged the importance of saving the planet as a key part of their lifestyle adjustments, but since turning vegan each of them also feels it's helped them reach new heights in terms of performance. For some, cutting out meat and dairy may well have a negative impact on energy or recovery, but if elite athlete testimony is anything to go by, they could be the exception rather than the rule. MF

RedBull

FLIP THE BIKE FANTASTIC

Street trials rider Danny MacAskill is celebrating ten years since his first YouTube video went viral, propelling the Scottish daredevil into a life of tricks for flicks. Angelina Manzano caught up with the 33-year-old to find out more about his decade in the spotlight »

Photography Red Bull

Modest and quietly spoken, in the unlikely event you hadn't seen his videos you would have no idea Danny MacAskill is an internet sensation. Yet since his breakthrough short film in 2009 – making him one of the very first viral stars – the street trials rider and Red Bull athlete has amassed over 450 million views on YouTube alone.

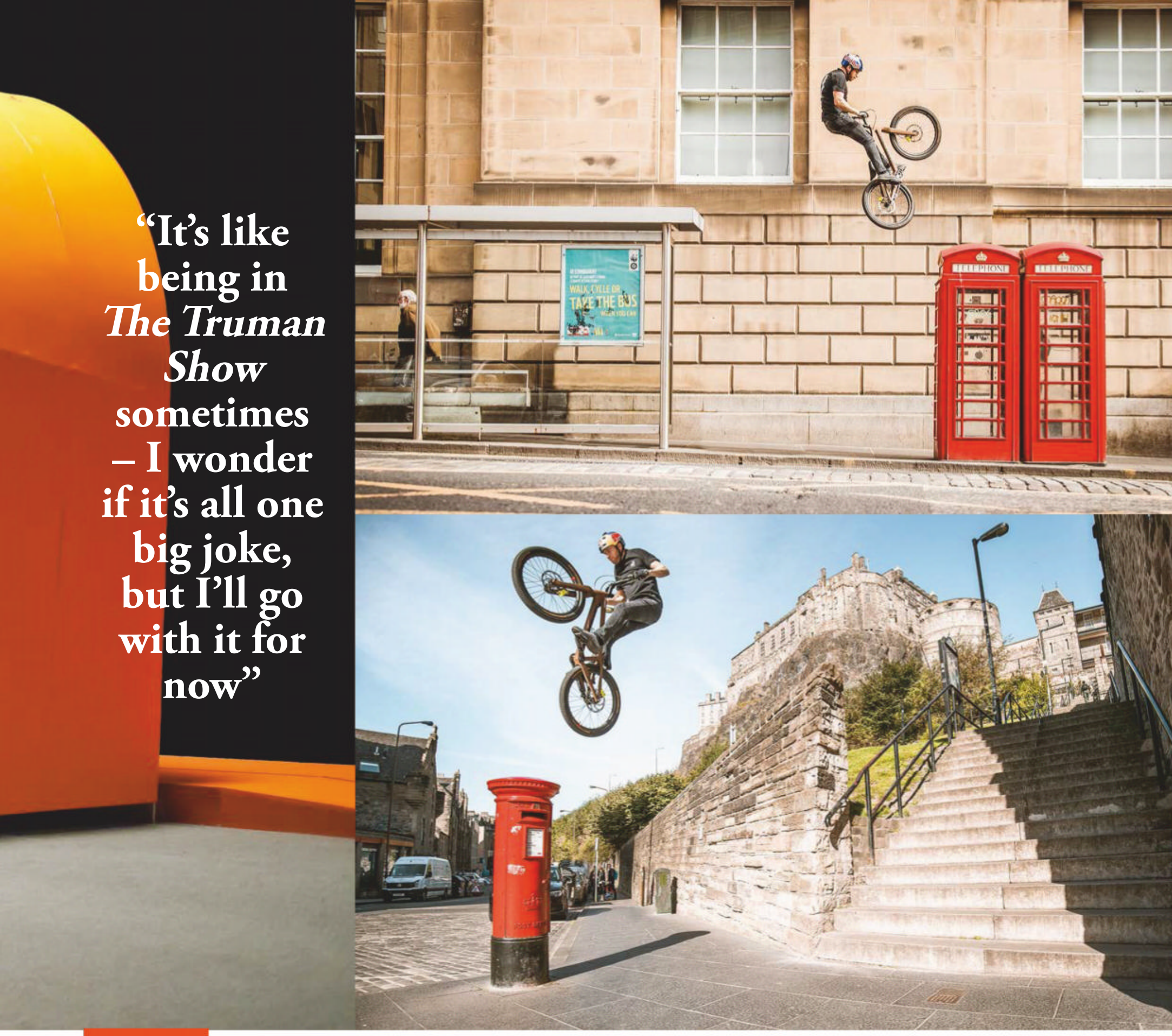
Little wonder, then, that he gave up his job as a mechanic to pursue a life on the road, travelling the world and performing increasingly daring tricks to impress his ever-growing online audience.

Men's Fitness: You've come a long way since you gave up your job as a mechanic – does it feel surreal, or was this always in your sights?

Danny MacAskill: "My flatmate and I were just filming for fun. We were working really hard and trying to make it as good a film as possible for the biking world, but we had no idea when we put it online that it was going to go viral on YouTube and get the attention that it did. I never had a goal of being a professional biker at all – it was just my hobby that I've been lucky enough to turn into a job."

MF: What first attracted you to mountain biking and trials cycling?

DM: "I grew up in a wee village called Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye and we used to use our bikes to get around to school or friends' houses. When I was a kid I had a lot of energy, so I just ended up putting a lot of that energy into my bike and trying to learn how to do skids and wheelies. I've always enjoyed pushing my riding. Then in my teens I found out it was a thing, called trials riding, so I started upgrading my bike accordingly."



“It’s like being in *The Truman Show* sometimes – I wonder if it’s all one big joke, but I’ll go with it for now”

MF: Did you have any idea that first video would be such a hit?

DM: “YouTube was just emerging at that point back in 2009. I think it was only three or four years old. The *Inspired Bicycles* film ended up being the most watched sports video globally on YouTube for a number of years. That’s completely surreal. It’s like being in *The Truman Show* sometimes – I wonder if it’s all one big joke, but I’ll go with it for now.”

MF: How heavily do you and other stunt athletes rely on YouTube and similar video formats to get noticed?

DM: “Although I’ve had quite a few videos on YouTube that have gone viral, especially working with Red Bull, I don’t really consider myself a YouTuber as such. It kind of conjures up the idea of folk vlogging or maybe clickbait. I mean, YouTube is the platform where you search for videos – and if you’re lucky, or you make the right kind of content, it gets shared around the world and the next thing you know it maybe opens up some doors that might not have opened otherwise. So it is really important. Mainstream media is still important and if you can get in the news that really helps – but video is really defining our age, isn’t it?”

MF: What is it that makes your brand of stunts unique?

DM: “The thing about my riding is that it’s generally fairly slow and I try to make the videos appeal to a wider audience outside of the biking world, so if somebody comes across one of my videos and they’ve never seen any bike riding like that before, they can understand and be entertained as well. I try to make it work and be relatable on a few different levels.”

MF: Your stunts are pretty dicey – do you ever feel fear, or does the adrenaline always take over and quash that?

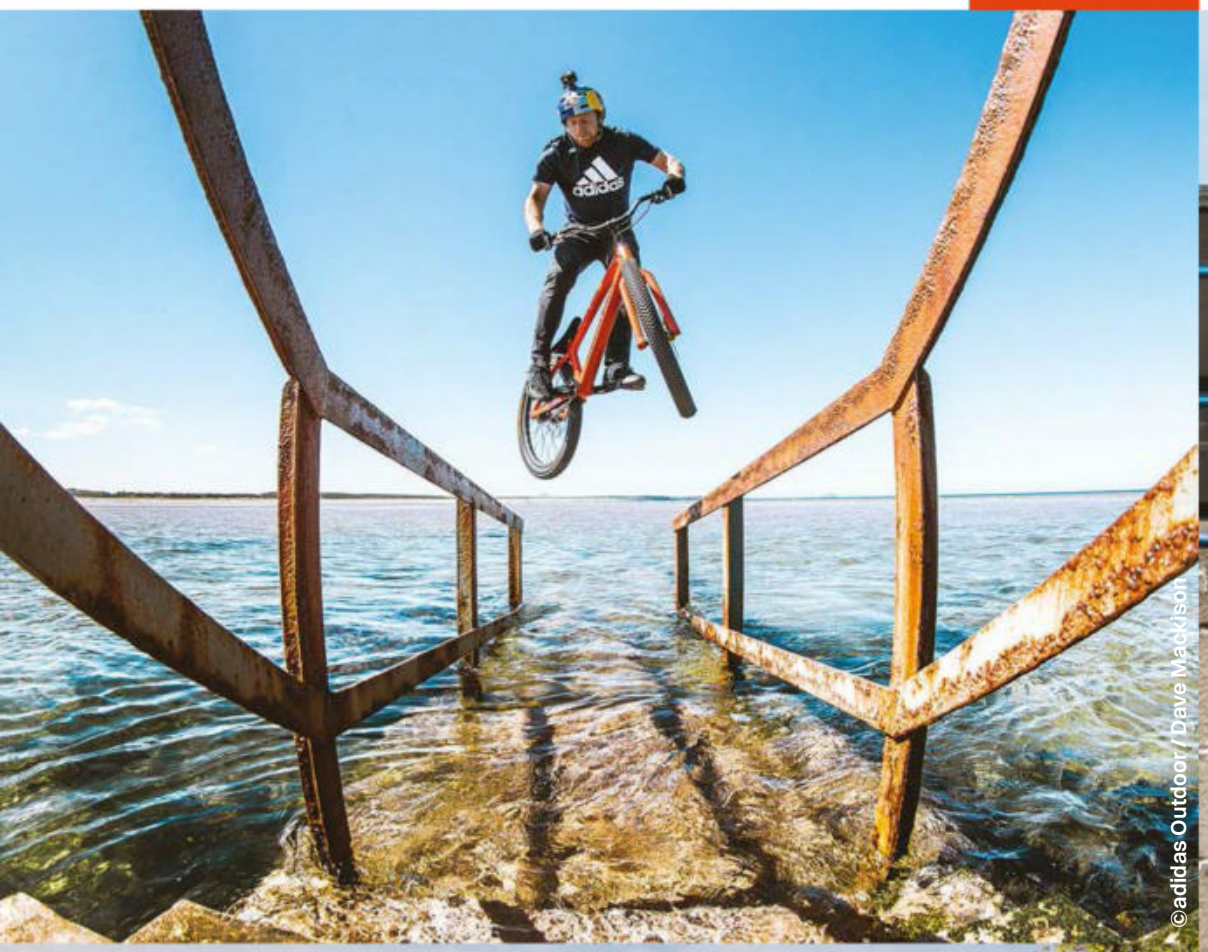
DM: “Oh, yeah, for sure! I definitely have a lot of fear. Too much of it, in fact. What you don’t see is that sometimes it will take me a couple of hours to get the guts up to go. I think we all have an inherent fear of the unknown. You have to try and fight that with all of the logic that’s in your brain. It can be quite a battle for sure. But usually I’ll get it done, or I’ll have at least tried it. I don’t often walk away – unless it’s really bad conditions. A lot of bike riding, as with other

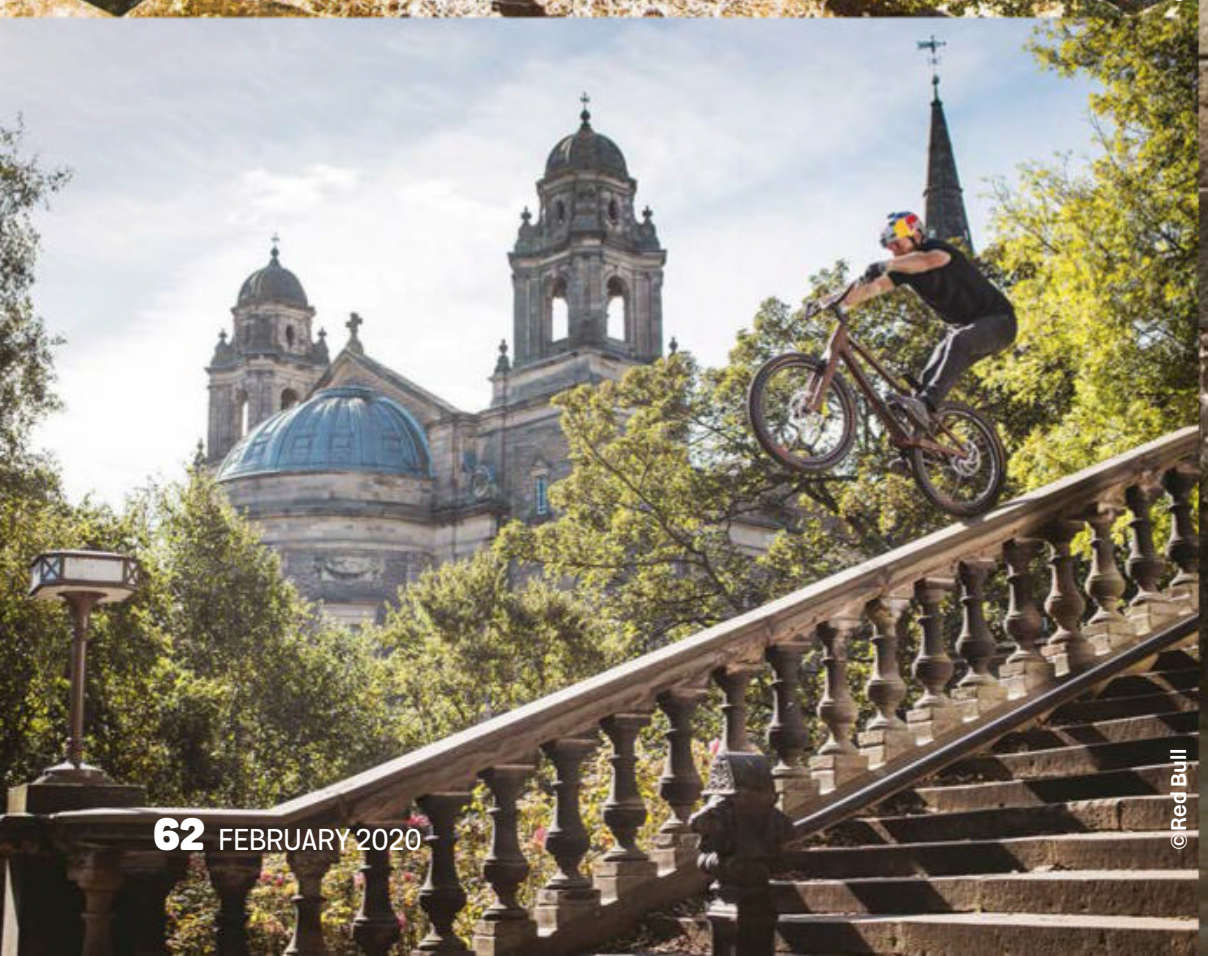
sports, is about visualisation. Imagine yourself doing something and close your eyes, and feel how it's going to feel – the problem is you can imagine how it's going to feel to crash as well!"

MF: How much work goes into choreographing a video?
DM: "It's a funny one. The overall concept tends to be just an idea that I have. And I'm usually the one driving the creative on that side: locations, music, tricks. Then I work with my friends who run various production companies, and of course the brands and sponsors that I have. Especially folk like Red Bull who really enable me. Some of the films come together really quickly. But then others will take months or even years of planning to make them come together. There's a lot of perseverance that goes into it."

MF: You practice for several hours a day to keep your skills on point – do you have to train in a specific way?
DM: "Most of my fitness comes through riding. It's not like I specifically train on my bike, I just ride wherever for fun, just doing whatever I feel. I do spend some time in the gym as well, but that's a lot to do with rehabbing from various injuries: focused work to maintain my back and my knees. I've been riding for about 24 years, so I have a lot of muscle memory, which helps you keep sharp, and when it comes to learning new tricks it's just about going through the motions and trying to learn them in a place I can limit the potential for injuries."

MF: Have you had any bad falls or injuries?
DM: "Loads. I've broken over 30 bones, I've had loads of soft tissue injuries, but the one that's been the biggest pain is that I tore a disc in my lower back about ten years ago. I've had an operation on it but it still lingers. I try to use injury downtime in a positive way to let other bits of my body heal as well, and it's also a good time for planning the next project. You need to not get too bummed out, just accept the chill time you're going to have and try to get back in the gym as soon as possible."





Photography adidas Outdoor / Dave Mackison

MF: You're originally from the Isle of Skye – did it provide the perfect training ground?

DM: "The opposite: I was quite lucky to be limited by my surroundings on Skye. When you're limited, you have to be more creative to come up with some fun, new ways of riding your bike. That's how *Inspired Bicycles* came around, because I'd had all of these slightly more unusual tricks that I'd learned to make the most of what was around me."

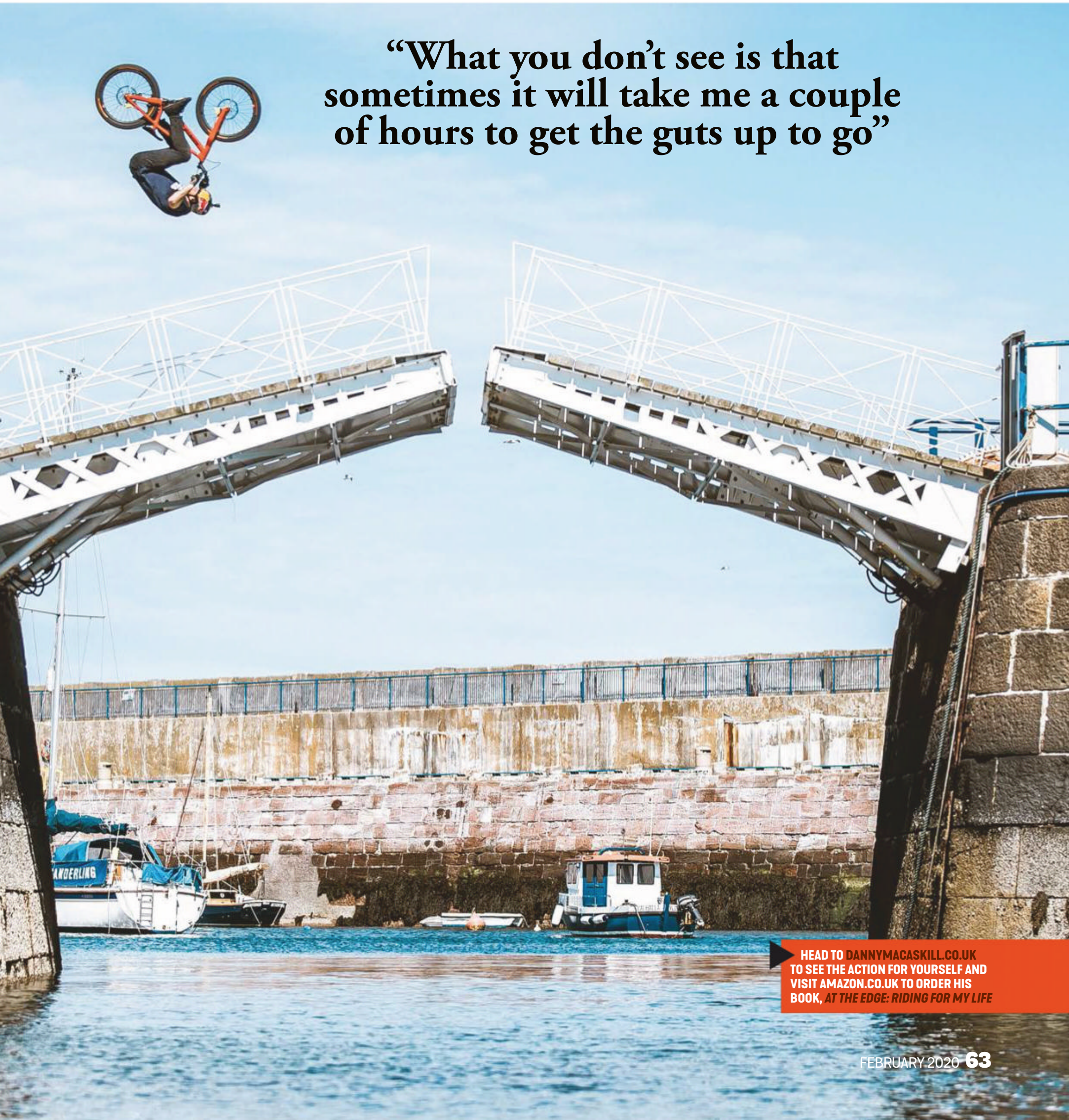
MF: What advice would you give to wannabe trials riders?

DM: "The best advice I would say is to enjoy what you're doing and just persevere, because you're not going to learn anything if you don't. Have some fun as well; if you're having fun, it's not such hard work."

MF: What's next for you?

DM: "I'm not a competitive athlete, so what I'm doing is a lot more about being creative and making content. Trying to make some fun bike films and telling stories. Luckily, there's always an appetite for content, so I'd like to think that I can adapt with the times. There will be a point when I can't jump as high or so far, but I can hopefully use the skills that I have to tell different kinds of stories over the years. That's my plan, anyway." MF

"What you don't see is that sometimes it will take me a couple of hours to get the guts up to go"



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ADVERTORIAL

FAT TO FIT

Ex Liverpool and England footballer Neil 'Razor' Ruddock reveals the food and exercise plan that fuelled his 1.5 stone transformation

When he received major health warnings on ITV's *Harry's Heroes* earlier this year, Neil Ruddock vowed to ditch his unhealthy habits and get back in shape. To kickstart his weight loss he turned to musclefood.com for a bespoke training and nutrition plan that delivered every meal and snack he needed direct to his door.

RAZOR'S OLD WAYS

Since his retirement in 2003, diet has always been a major stumbling block for the once tough-tackling defender. He admitted most days typically involved a greasy fry-up for breakfast and fully loaded takeaways for dinner.

"After training pretty much every day of my life for three decades," he says, "it's easy to get unfit and be lazy when you stop playing."

But when Ruddock's friend and former teammate Justin Edinburgh passed away during the summer, it hit him hard, and spurred him on to take charge of his health.

"Losing Justin so tragically made me realise nobody really knows what's happening inside their body," says Ruddock, "so everyone should try to make healthy improvements where they can."

As he's not as active now as he was during his playing days, Ruddock's diet was something that drastically needed to change, and his new-look nutrition plan is the main reason for his impressive weight-loss results.

"Fortunately, musclefood came along at just the right time for me," he explains, "and I've dropped around 10kg since starting their Do The Unthinkable™ diet.

"My cholesterol is ten times better, my blood pressure is back to normal and I've also gained muscle by doing upper-body exercises and weight training."

Thanks to the Do The Unthinkable™ diet, the ex-Tottenham star has dropped two shirt sizes and trimmed his waist from 48 to 44 inches.

Finding healthier alternatives to his favourite snacks and foods proved to be crucial: "The problem was, I often used to have bacon and eggs or a fry-up in the morning and I could never stop at just one main when ordering a takeaway in the evening.

"But now I enjoy lots of veg with every meal. My favourite musclefood products are their healthy versions of chicken in black bean sauce, and pork scratchings. There's so much variety and flavour that it doesn't feel like a diet at all."

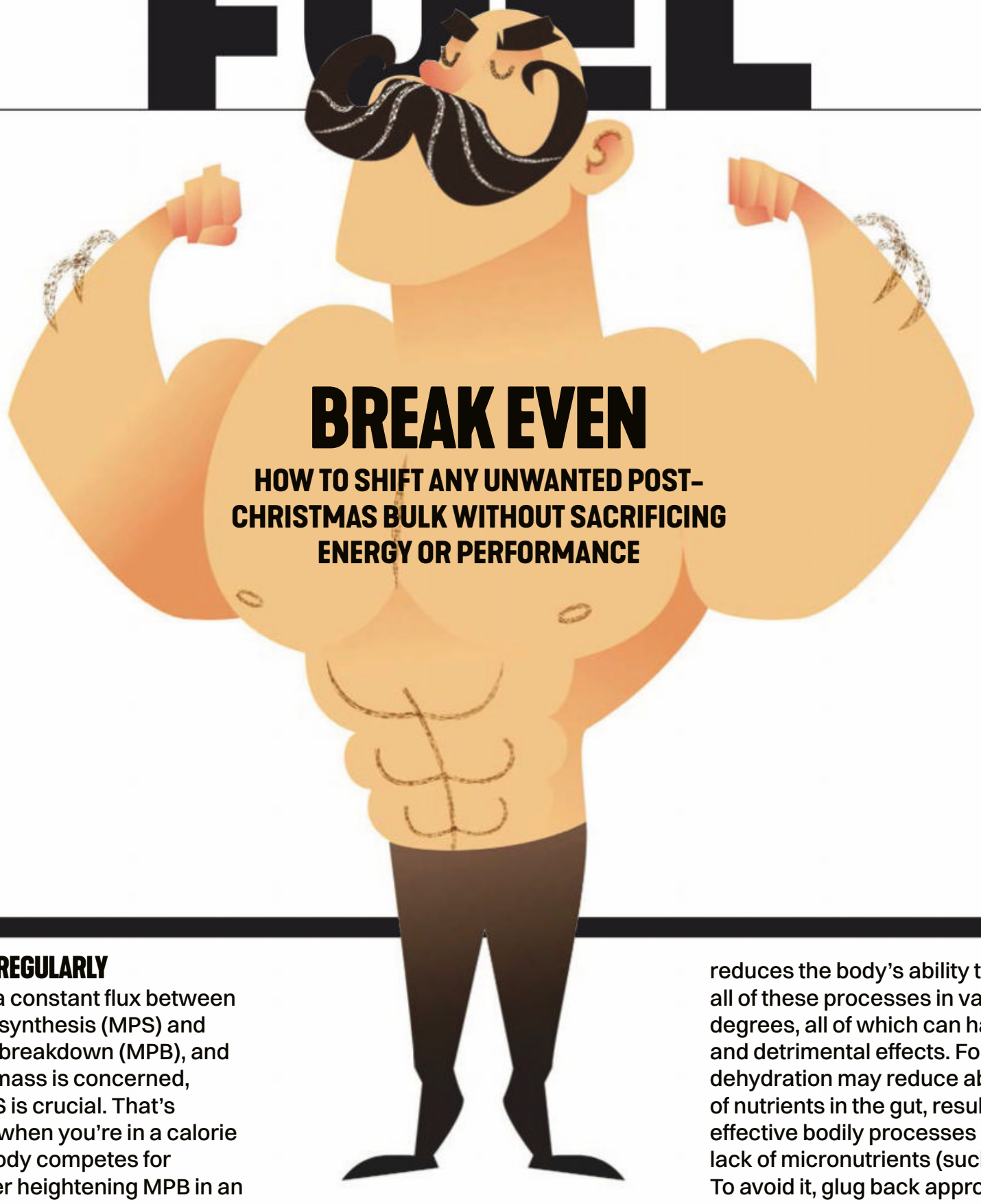
As well as convenient, healthy food, the plan ensures every meal and snack a person needs for the week is tailored to their calorie needs, and every meal is ready in under ten minutes. Do The Unthinkable™ also comes with a workout guide supplied by musclefood's in-house PT.

"Exercising more has made me healthier and happier," says Ruddock, "and it's benefitted my family life. I've got more time to play with the kids and I'm even sleeping better.

"I've got bad ankles, knees and hips so I can't spend hours on a treadmill, but the short, high-intensity workouts are perfect for anyone with joint problems."

TO FIND OUT MORE VISIT
DOTHEUNTHINKABLE.COM

FUEL



BREAK EVEN

HOW TO SHIFT ANY UNWANTED POST-CHRISTMAS BULK WITHOUT SACRIFICING ENERGY OR PERFORMANCE

1. EAT PROTEIN, REGULARLY

Your body is in a constant flux between muscle protein synthesis (MPS) and muscle protein breakdown (MPB), and where muscle mass is concerned, stimulating MPS is crucial. That's especially true when you're in a calorie deficit, as the body competes for nutrients, further heightening MPB in an effort to find fuel for bodily functions.

So unless a reduction in muscle mass is your aim, you want to ensure plenty of MPS. The best way to do that? Eating enough protein – 20-30g every three to four hours should do it. After that time, another protein top-up will help you remain in a state of MPS and retain your hard-earned muscle. Remember that skeletal muscle is metabolically active, meaning the more you have, the more energy you will burn.

2. EAT A RAINBOW A DAY

Energy metabolism is heavily regulated by dietary vitamins and minerals, and the adverse effects linked with deficiencies of these micronutrients is well recognised. Each colour associated with a particular fruit or vegetable is formed by specific phytonutrients, indicating an abundance of specific vitamins and minerals. Consuming a variety of colours – or eating a rainbow a day – results in a balanced intake of micronutrients to support the body's functions, including fat loss and muscle gain. Fibre-rich foods (largely vegetables) also help you stay fuller for longer.

3. DRINK PLENTY OF WATER

Water is an essential component of the human body, making up approximately 70 per cent of all our cells. Functions include transportation of nutrients, elimination of waste products, regulation of body temperature, maintenance of blood circulation and facilitation of digestion. Dehydration reduces the body's ability to regulate all of these processes in varying degrees, all of which can have profound and detrimental effects. For example, dehydration may reduce absorption of nutrients in the gut, resulting in less effective bodily processes due to the lack of micronutrients (such as fat loss). To avoid it, glug back approximately 0.04L water per kg body mass. So if you weigh 75kg, aim for three litres of water a day.

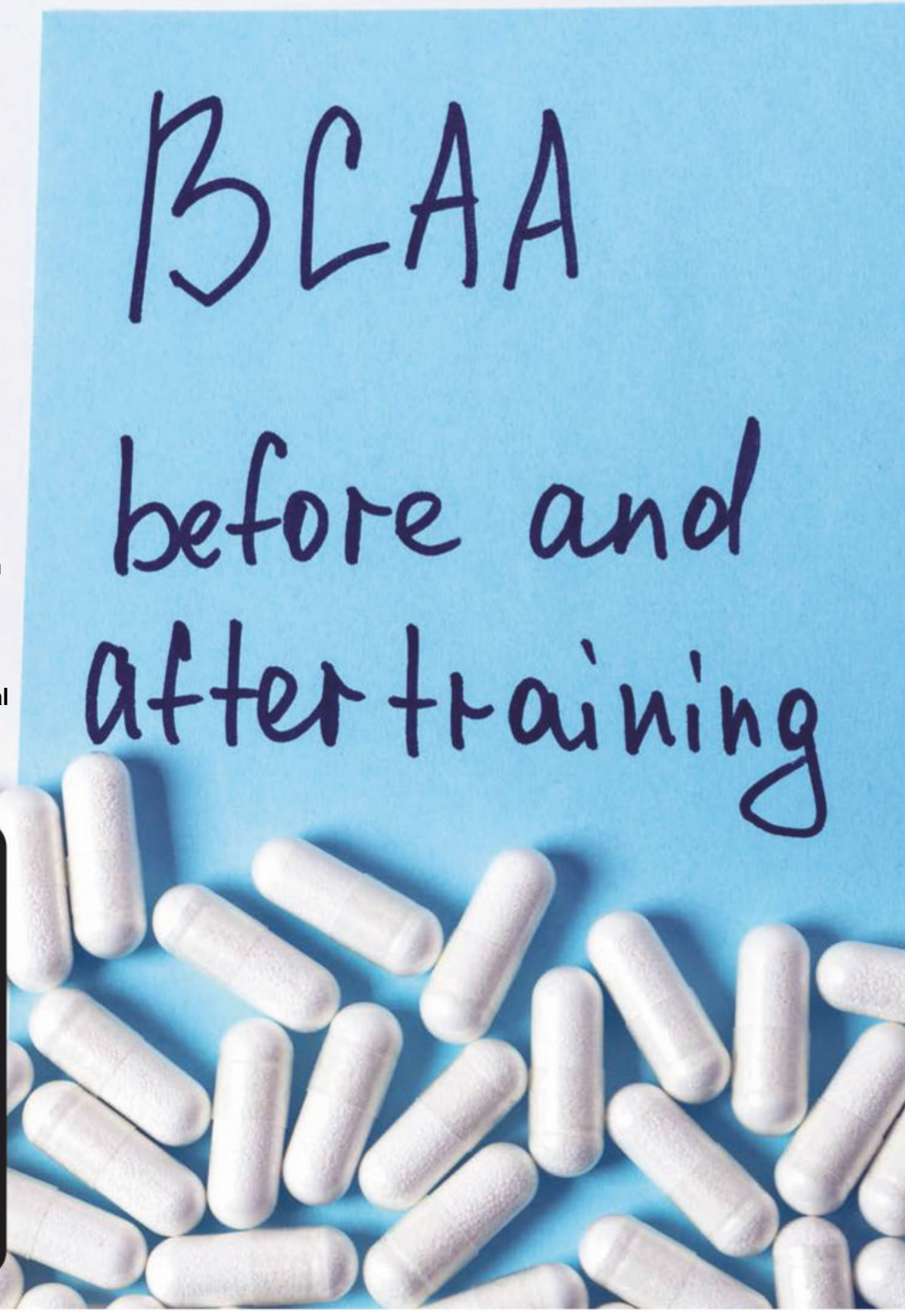
4. FOLLOW THE 85:15 RULE

Cheat meals are not only normal, they're to be encouraged. Indulging every now and then is good for both body and mind, helping you to stick to the longer term plan. Sustainability is the key to success. Studies have shown that through restriction, you're much more likely to completely abandon your dietary efforts comparatively to those who treat themselves, sensibly, every now and then. If you look after your meals approximately 85 per cent of the time, the other 15 per cent should not significantly impact you. Enjoy yourself, but quickly get back on track.

Words Dr Warren Bradley, Goal Master Fitness Photography Getty Images

UP YOUR AMINOS

You know that working out damages your muscles – that's the point of it. Exercise-induced muscle damage can last several days, and while it's ultimately a good thing – forcing muscles to regrow stronger – branched chain amino acids (BCAAs) are a popular choice to counter the related soreness. How many BCAAs you need, however, has been a source of debate. A recent, albeit small, study looked at different doses in relation to muscle soreness and overall recovery following intensive strength training, and the higher dose of 18g pre- and post-workout was more effective. Certain foods – chicken, eggs, cottage cheese and fish – naturally contain BCAAs, but for optimal results supplementation is recommended.



DID YOU KNOW?

Another way to reduce delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS): digestive enzyme supplementation. A recent study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Science Research* found that a multi enzyme (containing alpha-amylase, protease, cellulase, lactase and lipase) resulted in significant improvement in pain and tenderness, and may be an effective way of relieving the symptoms of DOMS.

HERBAL REMEDY

Sleep is essential to both performance and progress. Not getting enough of it affects your efforts to build muscle and lose fat – not to mention your general health and happiness. If you're struggling to get enough shut eye, the Indian herb ashwagandha has been found to be highly effective at inducing sleep. Just one dose of 300mg extract twice daily has been shown to reduce both the time taken to drift off and the quality of sleep. On the back of such findings, sales in the US grew a whopping 165.9 per cent last year.

Words Christine Bailey Photography Shutterstock / Getty Images

POTATO POWER-UP

When it comes to endurance performance, carbohydrates that are rapidly digested and absorbed are ideal. But instead of reaching for an energy gel, you might be better off picking up a potato. Researchers compared the effectiveness of potato puree and energy gels to fuel trained cyclists over a two-hour cycle, followed by a time trial. They found potato was just as effective as the energy gels in sustaining performance and blood glucose levels. Potatoes are also a surprisingly good source of many performance nutrients, including B vitamins, potassium, manganese, magnesium and vitamin C.

TRY THIS:

LEVAGEN+ SPORT

£32.99, healthspan.co.uk

Healthspan Elite's Levagen+ Sport is the once-a-day tablet that's been shown to help decrease inflammation, as well as acute and chronic soreness. There are also links to improved sleep. Marketed as an alternative to cannabidiol (CBD) oil – which has soared in popularity recently, but some see it as controversial because it's derived from the cannabis plant – Levagen+ Sport contains an ingredient called palmitoylethanolamide (PEA), which is found naturally in the body and is what promotes the anti-inflammatory effect.

PRE-RACE PROTECTION

About to begin marathon training? Consumption of a particular strain of probiotic, Lactobacillus casei Shirota (found in Yakult), for 30 days prior to running a marathon was found to modulate the immune and inflammatory response after the race. Marathon runners are particularly susceptible to upper respiratory tract infections, as heavy training suppresses the body's immune system and lowers what's called Salivary Secretary Immunoglobulin A (SigA) – our first line of defence against infections. In a study published in the journal *Nutrients*, researchers found just one month of drinking the fermented milk had a significant effect on maintaining immune protection.

TWEET TOPICS

Analysis of 'twitter noise' has been used to identify key food trends among consumers. Solutions for Retail Brands (S4RB), partnered with Warwick Analytics, found vegan food, plastic, packaging and sustainability were top topics based on analysis carried out in 2019. Waitrose led the field for positive discussions about its meat-free offerings, while Asda and Co-op trailed behind in the plant-based taste stakes.

BUTTER UP

SPREAD IT, BLITZ IT OR EAT IT BY THE SPOONFUL, NUT BUTTER'S AS VERSATILE AS IT DELICIOUS. PACKED WITH PROTEIN AND HEALTHY FATS, IT CAN ALSO MAKE ANY DISH A MORE PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED OPTION – TRY FOR YOURSELF WITH ONE OF THESE HIGH-ENERGY RECIPES FROM MERIDIAN

ALMOND BUTTER FRENCH TOAST

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 2)

- 2 eggs
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- 4 slices brioche
- Knob of butter
- 2 tbsp Meridian Smooth Almond Butter
- Fresh fruit to serve

METHOD

- Beat together the eggs and cinnamon in a wide shallow dish and soak the brioche slices well.
- Heat a knob of butter in a frying pan and cook 2 slices of brioche on one side for 2 minutes, until golden brown. Flip one slice over and dollop 1 tbsp of Meridian Almond Butter on the cooked side, spreading out a little.
- Lay the other slice on top, browned side down, and continue to cook for 2 minutes until the bottom is browned.
- Carefully flip the whole sandwich over to cook the final side. Repeat with the remaining slices of brioche.
- Cut both sandwiches in half and serve with fresh fruit.

Per serving: Kcals: 528, Protein: 17.4g, Fats: 20.9g, Carbs: 63.4g

BERRY CASHEW SMOOTHIE BOWL

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 1)

FOR THE SMOOTHIE

- 200g frozen mixed berries
- 1 banana
- 2 tbsp Meridian Cashew Butter
- 150ml almond or cashew milk

TO SERVE

- Berries
- Handful of granola
- Extra Cashew Butter

METHOD

- Put all the smoothie ingredients into a blender and whizz until smooth.
- Tip into a bowl, top with berries and scatter with a handful of granola.
- Drizzle over a little extra Cashew Butter and serve.

Per serving: Kcals: 490, Protein: 12.3g, Fats: 18.6g, Carbs: 76.2g

Samantha Hadidi is an ambassador for Meridian Foods. For more recipe inspiration, head to **meridianfoods.co.uk**

SMASHED PEA AND ALMOND TOAST

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 1)

- 2 slices sourdough bread
- 250g frozen peas
- 2 tbsp Meridian Smooth Almond Butter
- ½ lemon
- Drizzle of olive oil
- 1 clove of garlic
- Chilli flakes and radish to garnish

METHOD

- Toast the bread and defrost the peas in hot water. Drain the peas and roughly mash in a bowl with a pinch of salt, the Meridian Smooth Almond Butter and a squeeze of lemon juice.
- When the bread is toasted, drizzle with a little oil and give a quick rub with the garlic.
- Thickly spread the pea smash on top and garnish with slices of radish, a few chilli flakes and some lemon zest.

Per serving: Kcals: 680, Protein: 28g, Fats: 29.9g, Carbs: 76.4g

SUPER CRUNCHY RICH ROAST THAI SALAD

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 3)

- 1 red cabbage, shredded
- 1 green cabbage, shredded
- 4-6 spring onions
- 1 red pepper, thinly sliced
- 1½ cups grated carrot
- 1 cup edamame beans
- ½ cup salted roasted peanuts
- Bunch coriander, finely sliced
- 2 tbsp sesame seeds

FOR THE DRESSING

- 5 tbsp Meridian Rich Roast Super Crunchy Peanut Butter
- Juice one lime (or more, to taste)
- 1 tbsp tamari or coconut aminos
- 1 tbsp sesame oil
- 1 tbsp maple syrup or honey
- 2 tsp minced ginger
- ¼ tsp chilli flakes
- Water, to thin

METHOD

- Start by making your dressing. Whisk together all ingredients, adding water to thin until you reach your desired consistency (5 tbsp should do it), then season to taste. Pour into a jar and place in the fridge.
- Make your salad by stirring together all ingredients until well combined.
- Drizzle over the dressing and toss well to combine. Serve immediately.

Per serving: Kcals: 442, Protein: 28g, Fats: 16.4g, Carbs: 59g

GUT FEELING

Lydia Smith explores the growing link between gut health and mental wellbeing

We've known for a long time that the way we feel affects our guts. Just think about the last time you had a job interview or another situation that made you nervous or anxious. Most likely, you will have felt nauseous, experienced butterflies or suffered a stomach ache.

That's because the brain and gastrointestinal system are intimately connected via the 'gut-brain axis' – a fancy term for the communication network that links the pair. A two-way street, the brain is able to send signals to the gut and vice versa.

Now, it's emerging that the ecosystem of bacteria and microbes that live in your digestive tract – known as the gut microbiome – could impact the way you think and feel. Although the gut might not be the first place you think of when it comes to mental health, it may well have a profound influence over your sense of wellbeing.

"What we know is that the gut-brain axis is an area that only recently started getting traction," says Professor Jeroen Raes, a microbiologist at the University of Leuven and the Flanders Institute for Biotechnology.

"We know that in a great number of mental illnesses – and we're looking as broad as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, to depression and anxiety – we see studies appearing where the gut microbiota (micro-organisms) are disturbed or altered in patients."

BAC FOR GOOD

Earlier this year, Professor Raes and his team published research that found people with depression had consistently low levels of certain bacteria whether they took antidepressants or not. The researchers drew on medical tests and GP records to look for links between depression, quality of life and microbes lurking in the faeces of more than 1,000 people.

They found that two kinds of bugs, Faecalibacterium and Coprococcus, were both more common in people who claimed to enjoy a high mental quality of life. Meanwhile, those with depression had lower than average levels of the bacteria species Coprococcus and Dialister.

"It is thought that gut bacteria may play a part in causing inflammation in the gut, which may lead to neuroinflammation. That has been linked to various mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety"

Although scientists have studied schizophrenia for many years, it was only recently that a possible connection between the disorder and gut bacteria came under scrutiny. In a study published earlier this year, researchers in China and the US found that patients with schizophrenia had a less diverse microbiome than patients without the condition – and that the microbiomes from schizophrenic patients also had unique kinds of bacteria.

There are a number of animal studies which have strengthened the theory that the bacteria in our gut could have an affect on our mental health, too. In one study, Chinese researchers took a sample of the gut microbiota from patients with major depressive disorder and planted them in germ-free mice. When these mice took part in a 'forced' swimming task, they were quicker to quit. This behaviour, researchers suggested, may be linked to the loss of interest and sense of hopelessness associated with depression.

INFLAMMATORY BEHAVIOUR

We don't know exactly how these effects are caused, but Raes explains that there are several theories.

It is thought that gut bacteria may play a part in causing inflammation in the gut, which may lead to neuroinflammation. That has been linked to various mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety.

"In many of those mental health studies, we find changes in the gut microbiota that make us think that inflammation might play a part. We see, for example, a decrease in anti-inflammatory bacteria or an increase of pro-inflammatory bacteria," Professor Raes says. "One of the theories is that you have intestinal inflammation that is associated or triggered by the gut microbiota and is spread further into neuroinflammation."

Another theory is that gut bacteria act as a kind of "metabolic factory of chemicals" which could affect mental wellbeing, Professor Raes explains: "In our study on depression, we have shown that many gut bacteria are able to produce and metabolise chemical compounds that have the potential to moderate our nervous system – things like dopamine, serotonin and GABA (Gamma aminobutyric acid)."

These neurotransmitters act as chemical messengers, and are linked to mood and wellbeing. "What we see is that the gut bacteria are able to produce such compounds," says Professor Raes. "That makes an interesting theory where these compounds could then enter the bloodstream, possibly cross the blood-brain barrier, and affect how our brain develops, or how we think and behave."

There is also an information 'highway' connecting the brain and the gut, called the vagus nerve, which has receptors near the gut lining that allow it to keep tabs on our digestion. In the intestine, microbes release chemical messengers that alter the signalling of this nerve, which in turn affects the brain's activity.

"The vagus nerve is a big nerve that goes from the intestinal tract straight into our brain," Professor Raes says. "It's used as a communication channel in both directions, for the gut to signal to the brain and the brain to signal to the gut, to sense satiety and things like that.

"The idea would be that if the bacteria are able to produce compounds that can signal nerves, it may be that these compounds can put signals on the vagus nerve and then that signal goes into the brain."

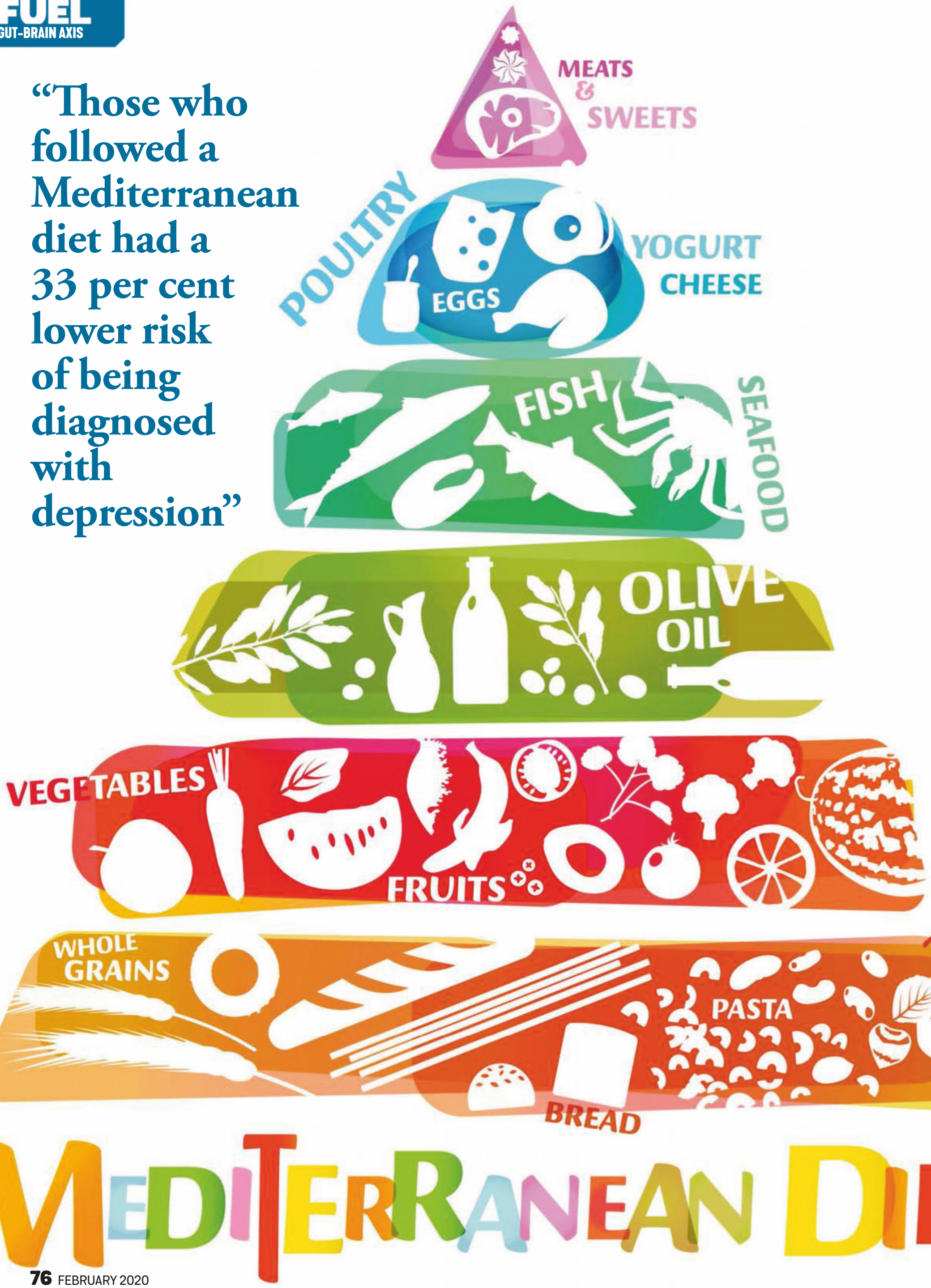
TURN TO THE PROS?

In recent years, scientists have begun to explore whether probiotics can play a role in supporting good mental health. These are live bacteria and yeasts promoted as having various health benefits. They are usually added to yogurts or taken as food supplements. They're often described as 'good' or 'friendly' bacteria, because they fight against harmful bacteria and prevent them from settling in the gut.

This year, however, a study suggested people who have anxiety may be helped by taking steps to regulate the microorganisms in their gut using probiotic and non-probiotic food and supplements. Researchers reviewed 21 studies that had examined more than 1,500 people, but overall, only 11 studies showed a positive effect on anxiety symptoms by regulating intestinal bacteria.

Professor Julio Licinio, who co-authored the paper linking schizophrenia with an impoverished gut microbiota, says probiotics may have the potential to impact mental health regulating our gut bacteria, but more research needs to be done.

"Those who followed a Mediterranean diet had a 33 per cent lower risk of being diagnosed with depression"



"To ascertain the efficacy of any treatment, including probiotics, rigorous clinical trials are required," Professor Licinio explains. "I am afraid that probiotics sold over the counter in drug stores or over the internet now have not undergone such trials."

It is very early days for this research, Professor Raes adds, but says it is the "next generation" of probiotics that may hold more answers.

"The thing that I am excited about is the next generation of probiotics, which is not going to be the bacteria we know from the dairy industry – lactobacilli or bifidobacteria – but rather organisms that have been sourced from healthy humans' microbiota. In the study on depression, we identified two or three organisms that were depleted in people with depression."

In theory, he explains, it might be that replenishing those missing organisms may act as a form of treatment in the future. "But we first need to prove the causality before we can make that statement."

WHAT MAKES A HEALTHY GUT?

Rather than a single species of bacteria being responsible for these effects, researchers believe it is the overall diversity of microbes that is important.

While we might not be able to manipulate our gut bacteria just yet, we do know that eating well may be associated with feelings of wellbeing. In 2018, a study published in *Nature* suggested that eating a Mediterranean diet rich in fish, nuts and vegetables could help lower a person's risk of depression.

Researchers from Spain, Britain and Australia analysed 41 studies published within the last eight years on the links between diet and depression. Those who followed a strict Mediterranean diet had a 33 per cent lower risk of being diagnosed with depression compared to people who were least likely to follow these eating habits.

"There is some research that the Mediterranean diet may have some positive effects on mental health – and even if it doesn't, it is thought to be good for your overall health," says Chloe Hall, dietitian and spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association.

"Even if you struggle to adopt the Mediterranean diet fully, we can all adopt some of the habits, such as increasing the variety and amount of fruit and vegetables we eat, choosing wholegrain carbohydrates, using olive oil and increasing our intake of nuts, seeds and pulses, while reducing our intake of red and processed meat."

Further study into how our gut-brain axis works and how gut bacteria affects our mental wellbeing is needed, as this research has only just begun.

"For a long time," says Professor Raes, "people have seen gut bacteria as a source of evil – a cause of disease. But the outcome of these studies is that it can be hugely beneficial.

"I think what's happening now is that we might take it one step further and we are going to take the bacteria from our gut and use them as medication – the bacteria becomes the drug against the disease, and that is an exciting prospect.

"There is a lot of work that needs to be done, but there is an interesting future ahead." MF

IMPROVE YOUR GUT HEALTH

FILL UP ON FIBRE

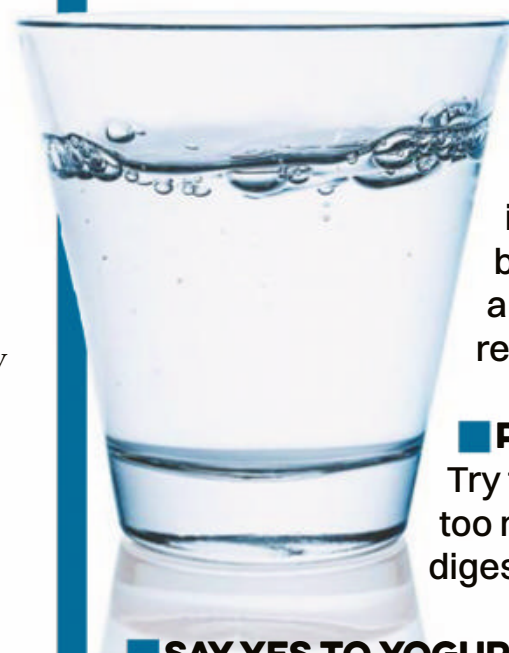
You should aim for roughly 30g a day. You can get fibre from various sources, including wholemeal bread, brown rice, fruit and vegetables, beans and oats – these feed healthy bacteria in the gut.

GET YOUR FIVE A DAY

It's recommended that you eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and veg every day, which includes fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced. Just be aware of added sugar in some canned fruit.

AVOID JUNK

Highly processed foods can contain ingredients that reduce 'good' bacteria and increase 'bad' bacteria. Avoid them as much as possible.



DRINK UP

Water encourages the passage of waste through your digestive system. It is recommended to drink between six and eight glasses a day, and more if you exercise regularly and sweat it out.

PHASE OUT FAT

Try to avoid overly fatty foods and too much fried stuff, as it's harder to digest and can cause stomach ache.

SAY YES TO YOGURT

Probiotic foods, such as certain yogurts, contain live bacteria thought to be beneficial to us, and they may encourage more microbes to grow.

Photography Getty Images / Shutterstock

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WATT UP

When you can't face the cold, maximise fitness and fat loss with a Wattbike and one of these lung-busting workouts

BEST FOR SPEED ENDURANCE

	TIME	RPM	ZONE	RPE	ELAPSED
10 MIN WARM-UP	3 mins	80-90	1-2	3-4	10 mins
	2 mins	85-95	2	4-6	
	1 min, 30 secs	90-100	2-3	6-8	
	1 min, 30 secs	95-105	3	8	
	1 min	100-110	1-2	8-9	
	1 min	80-90	2	3-4	
SET 1	4 x (30 sec effort, 30 sec recovery)	115-125 / 90	5 / 1	10 / 2	14 mins
	5 min recovery @ 85-90 rpm				19 mins
SET 2	4 x (30 sec effort, 30 sec recovery)	115-125 / 90	6 / 1	10 / 2	23 mins
5 MIN COOL-DOWN	5 mins	85-90	1	2	28 mins

BEST FOR FAT LOSS

	TIME	RPM	ZONE	RPE	ELAPSED
5 MIN WARM-UP	1 min	80-90	1-2	2-3	5 mins
	1 min	85-95	2	3-4	
	1 min	90-100	2-3	4-5	
	1 min	95-105	3	5-7	
	1 min	80-90	1-2	2-3	
SET 1	8 x (10 sec effort, 50 sec recovery)	120-130 / 85-90	6 / 1	10 / 2	13 mins
	3 min recovery @ 85-95 rpm				16 mins
SET 2	8 x (20 sec effort, 40 sec recovery)	120-130 / 85-90	6 / 1	10 / 2	24 mins
5 MIN COOL-DOWN	5 mins	85-90	1	2	29 mins

Photography Wattbike

ON THE BALL

Online PT Luke Grainger guides you through a Swiss ball core workout to work your abs from every angle

HOW TO
Exercises 1A and 1B are to be done consecutively. Once you've nailed all your reps, sets and rests for those two exercises, move on to 2A and 2B and repeat the process.

1A. PIKE

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis, triceps, pecs
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs

- With your hands under your shoulders, rest your shins on the Swiss ball.
- Keep your arms fixed and use your core to pull your hips up in the air, without sagging at the waist and losing your back.
- Hold for a few seconds, then slowly roll back out while keeping your midsection strong.

Photography Eddie Macdonald | Model Lee McLaughlin (W Model Management)

1B. CRUNCHES

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, recuts abdominis
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs
SETS: 2-3

- With your feet flat and your arms across your chest, slowly roll back over a stability ball until the back of your head is resting on the ball.
- For stability, press your tongue to the roof of your mouth and keep it there for the whole of the set (seriously, it works).
- Tuck your chin into your chest and squeeze your abs all the way up, until just your lower back and backside are left touching the ball.
- Keeping the tension throughout, begin to reverse the movement until the back of your head touches the ball again.

2A. HIP EXTENSION

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, glutes, hamstrings
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs

- Begin with your hands and toes on the ground, your back in good alignment and your hips on the ball.
- Now, lift your legs while keeping your arms straight.
- Pause at the top and then slowly lower your legs to the start position.
- Pause just before your toes touch the floor and then immediately go into the next rep.

2B. OBLIQUE CRUNCHES

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs
SETS: 2-3

- Start with your right hip on the ball, your arms across your chest, your feet split and your torso stretched over the ball.
- Slowly crunch up to the side until you're almost vertical.
- Pause briefly at the top and, keeping tension all the way, slowly return to the start position.
- Complete your reps, then turn around to work the other side.

3A. CRAB WALK

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis, glutes, hamstrings
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs

- With your upper back and head supported on the ball, plant your feet and have your hips up in the air, with your arms stretched to the side.
- Carefully begin to move your upper body and feet sideways, doing your best to keep your midsection, arms and feet from moving out of position.
- Your shoulder will now be off the ball a little and your core will be working like crazy. Pause, then slowly shuffle to the other side. That's one rep.

3B. PRONE LEG TWIST

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis, pecs, triceps
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs
SETS: 2-3

- With your hands on the floor and your feet on the ball, slowly tilt your hips and feet from one side to the other and back to the middle. That's one rep.
- Most importantly, go slowly and keep your hips up.

4A. DEAD BUG

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, recuts abdominis
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs

- Lie on your back with one arm and the opposite leg pressed either side of the ball (if you get this right the ball should be hovering above your midsection) and the other arm and leg hovering just above the ground.
- Slowly bring the arm and leg up from the ground to the ball and switch them over, lowering the other arm and leg towards the floor.
- Pause briefly and return them to the start position. That's one rep.

4B. JACK KNIFE

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis, pecs, triceps
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs
SETS: 2-3

- Begin with your shoelaces and shins on the ball and your upper body in the press-up position.
- Keeping your hips level and your back in alignment, bring your knees up towards your chest.
- Pause, then slowly return to the starting position.

5A. BALL PASS

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs

- While holding the ball, lie flat on the floor with your arms and legs long and just off the ground.
- Slowly bring your arms and legs up at the same time and pass the ball to your feet.
- Then take your arms and legs back towards the ground.
- Pause just off the floor, then return the ball to your hands and return to the starting position. That's one rep.

5B. THE SAW

MUSCLES WORKED: erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, obliques, recuts abdominis, pecs, lats, triceps, delts
REPS: 6-10
REST: 30-60 secs
SETS: 2-3

- Start with your toes on the ground and your elbows on the ball beneath your shoulders.
- Keeping your hips up throughout, begin to slowly roll the ball away by pressing your elbows forward.
- Pause briefly, then return to the starting position and go again.

FULL THROTTLE

TABATA is the short, sharp shock of cardio training. It's brutal but effective and, if you're really stuck for time, can be over in less than five minutes

1A. PLYOMETRIC SPLIT SQUAT

MUSCLES WORKED: glutes, hamstrings, quads, calves, core
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Begin by standing with your right leg forward, bent at the knee and foot flat on the floor. Your left leg should be positioned behind you, also bent at the knee, with your toes on the floor.
- Drive up through both feet at the same time, as explosively as you can so that you take off from the ground.
- While in the air, quickly switch the position of both legs, so that when you land your left leg is now forward and your right leg is behind.
- Land softly through bent knees and immediately repeat the movement.

HOW TO

TABATA is a highly effective way to torch fat... but only if you commit. Lacklustre efforts won't cut it; you need to work as hard as you can for each set. Do each exercise for 20 secs, rest for ten, then move immediately on to the next move. Good luck!

Words **Luke Grainger** Photography **Eddie Macdonald** | Model **Lee McLaughlin (W Model Management)**

1B. PRESS-UP WITH TOE TOUCH

MUSCLES WORKED: pecs, triceps, traps, delts, core
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Assume the usual press-up position with your hands and feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart.
- Keeping good form, lower your torso until your chest lightly touches the floor.
- Push back up to the start position, then drive your hips up in the air while simultaneously reaching one hand back towards the opposite foot.
- Return to the press-up position. That's one rep.
- Now repeat the process using the other hand.

1C. 180 JUMP SQUATS

MUSCLES WORKED: quads, hamstrings, glutes, calves
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Begin in a squat position with your chest up and your feet flat on the ground.
- Using your arms for momentum, drive up into the air and quickly turn your torso 180 degrees to face the other direction.
- Land through soft knees and immediately go into the next rep while keeping the pace up throughout the set.

1D. PRESS-UP TO SIT OUTSIDE

MUSCLES WORKED: pecs, triceps, delts, core, quads, hamstrings
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Begin by doing a deep press-up.
- At the bottom of the movement, lift one hand from the floor, bending the elbow and pulling it back while lifting your chest.
- At the same time, turn your torso, kick the opposite leg underneath you and out straight.
- Quickly return your hand and foot to the starting position, do another deep press-up and repeat on the other side with the other arm and leg.

1E. STAR JUMP

MUSCLES WORKED: delts, traps, abductors, lats, adductors, calves, core
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Stand tall with your feet together and your arms by your sides.
- Bend your knees and squat down while running your hands down towards your ankles.
- Drive up and jump into the air, while opening your legs to the side and lifting your arms to a horizontal position.
- Land through soft knees and go immediately into the next rep.

1F. WINDMILL PRESS-UP

MUSCLES WORKED: pecs, triceps, traps, delts, core, rhomboids, lats
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- From a press-up position, slowly lower your chest to the floor.
- Pause while keeping the tension and then explosively drive back up to the start.
- Once there, take one hand off the ground and out to the side while opening up your chest.
- Once your arms are stacked one on top of the other, pause and then slowly return to the start position. That's one rep.

16. 'BASTARDS'

MUSCLES WORKED: quads, glutes, hamstrings, core, chest, triceps, pecs, calves.
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Start by saying a short prayer. Then, standing tall with your feet hip-width apart, bend your knees and place your palms flat on the floor about shoulder-width apart.
- Hop your legs back at the same time to assume a press-up position.
- Do a scapular retraction press-up (where your chest gets all the way down to the ground, then you lift your hands off the floor by pulling your elbows back and squeezing your shoulder blades together).
- Then press yourself up and hop your feet back to your hands.
- From that crouched position, point your fingers to your temples with your elbows wide and drive up through your legs to jump in the air.
- Bend your knees as you land and go straight into the next rep. Easy...

1

2

3

4

5

1H. WALKOUTS

MUSCLES WORKED: pecs, triceps, delts, lats and core
REPS: 20 secs
REST: 10 secs

- Bend down to touch your toes.
- Now, begin to 'walk' your hands out from your legs, gradually dropping your hips as you go (making sure you keep your hips in good alignment and not sagging to the floor).
- Keep walking your hands out past the usual press-up position and see how far you can go. (As long as you don't collapse in a heap on the floor, you're doing it right.)
- Once you've reached your limit, walk the hands all the way back to your legs while lifting your hips at the same time.
- Appreciate the stretch in your hamstrings and lower back at the top for a second, then go straight into the next rep.

WHAT IT TAKES...

TO BE A WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL ATHLETE

HEAVY LIFTING, KILLER CORE WORK, FROZEN 'SHOULDER PADS' AND WEIGHTED DIPS – WORLD CHAMPION SIMON BROWN TAKES US BEHIND THE SCENES OF HIS ALL-ACTION SPORT

Simon Brown was a key member of the World Championship winning Great Britain wheelchair basketball team in 2018. He followed that up with the European title last summer, after beating Spain in a hard-fought final. Success, for Brown and the GB team, came thanks in no small part to their dedication to playing and training all year round.

REGIME

"We play in professional leagues and much of the physical training comes through games," Brown tells *MF*. "We have a lot during the club season and then we're back in the summer to do Team GB for internationals. With our clubs we usually do about five or six hours' training a day."

"Mornings can be individual stuff like shooting, with more teamwork or tactical stuff in the evening. There's a lot of gym work that we have to fit into that time as well. We do two or three full sessions a week and then have a match on the Saturday or Sunday. Everything through the week is worked on for the game at the weekend – and then we start over again on the Monday.

"I love doing teamwork sessions, especially the defence drills because you have to put in as much work as you can and whoever's the biggest, strongest and fastest is going to win. I'm also loving the gym work at the moment. I've done a lot of training to build up my strength and conditioning – you can have a lot of fun throwing weights around!

"We do a lot of free weights

Brown shoots a hoop in GB's win over Germany at the 2018 Wheelchair Basketball World Championship

and our main goal is to work on our power-to-weight ratio. The better that is, the faster we can push our chairs and the quicker we can get down the court.

"For power, I do a lot of bench press work. I try to counter that with cable pulls to ensure the muscles are balanced. We get a lot of shoulder injuries in our sport, so in the last few years we've put in a lot of smaller shoulder work to strengthen those areas – it involves small weights and it sucks. I'd much rather be picking up big heavy bars than piddling five kilo dumbbells, but it has to be done."

Brown and his teammates also have to pay additional attention to core work. "We do a lot of core stuff with cables, Swiss balls and bosu balls, because in wheelchair basketball there are a lot of guys with spinal injuries. The natural state is to be quite weak in the core area and unbalanced, so core strengthening drills help us with control and balance. It means we're not falling out of our chair, we can move them back, tilt them and generally hold our chairs in stronger positions.

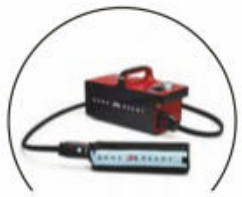
"A big challenge for our strength and conditioning coaches is trying to find out what works best for each individual. I've had most success with quite dynamic, functional stuff: basically a lot of catching and throwing – basketball-related movements – but using the Swiss and bosu balls to isolate the core as much as possible."

MINDSET

Even in the gym, Brown employs elements of sports psychology and visualisation to develop that medal-winning mindset: "If I'm doing bench press I'll try and move the bar as quick as I can, imagining I'm pushing my wheels at speed. Dips are also good for that, because they replicate the movement of pushing my wheels."

The toughest mental element for Brown has resulted from team dynamics. "We play professionally, so everyone who is here for Team GB get-togethers is pretty much the star player at their club. We've got all these big egos together and it's been something we struggled with for quite a few years. More recently, we've managed to find a way to make that work. We've created a great atmosphere within the team and that's been key to our success. It's come about by working together and realising that everyone's got to sacrifice a little bit of their ego and find their place and find out how they individually can help the team.

"We have senior, experienced pros and some great young talents coming through – by looking at our roles within that dynamic and putting the team first, we've overcome those problems."



KEEP IT COOL

"One of the post-match routines we have in wheelchair basketball is the 'Game Ready' system," says Brown. "It's an ice compression machine we can stick on our shoulders and backs. We look like American Football Players when we've got it on, but it works on the same principle as ice baths. It's awesome."

NUTRITION

"With wheelchair basketball, people are still trying to work out what the ideal body composition is. There's not a lot of research into it at the moment, so it's pretty much down to what works for the individual.

"I went into the World Championships at about 84 kilos and felt really strong for it. But this year I've stripped off almost 10 kilos, working on that power-to-weight ratio and I've found some amazing gains. I'm much quicker now. It's come from experimenting. I took quite a lot of the carbohydrates out of the base of my diet and increased my protein intake to achieve it.

"Beyond that, it's just really important to eat a balanced diet: lots of vitamins and protein. I've been playing in Italy for the past ten years, so pasta has figured heavily. Now I'm moving to Germany to play there, so that could all change – we'll have to see whether their pre-match meals are as good." MF

"I'VE DONE A LOT OF STUFF TO BUILD STRENGTH AND WORK ON CONDITIONING – YOU CAN HAVE A LOT OF FUN THROWING WEIGHTS AROUND!"

Words **Rob Kemp** Photography **SA Images**

SIMON SAYS... PERFECT YOUR DIPS

"When you see people in the gym doing dips, they're usually just going through the motions," says Brown. "When I do them I'm trying to control the weight so much, I hold it as I'm dipping down slowly, and then hit the hardest point to hold it at before I explode upwards as quickly as I can. Controlling weighted dips is an exercise challenge that all gym-goers should consider."

NEW BEG

START THE DECADE AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON BY TAKING THESE SIMPLE

EMBRACE NATURE

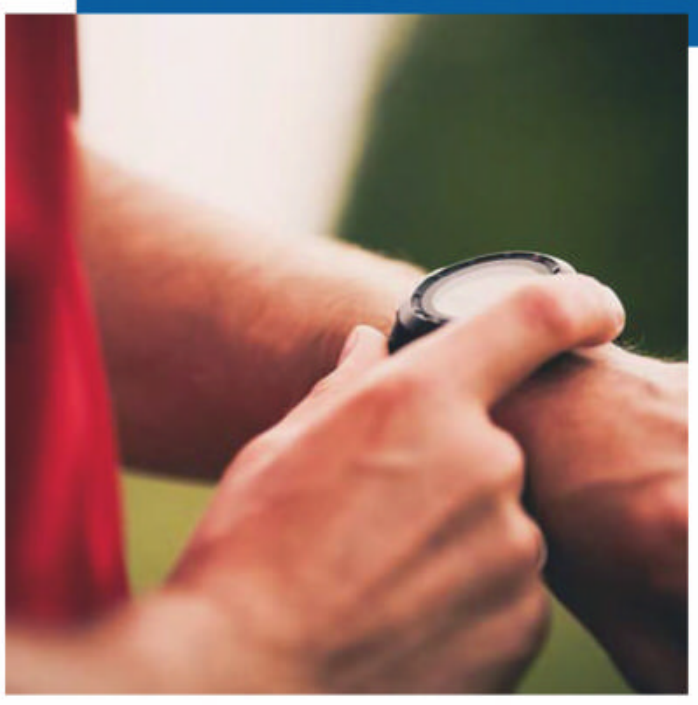
Committing to a mere 20 minutes of moderate exercise – a routine walk or recreational ride – in a place that makes you feel in contact with nature will significantly lower your stress hormone levels. That's not just our suggestion, but the science-backed findings of a study into the effect a dose of urban nature can have upon one's mind, as recently published in the publication *Frontiers in Psychology*.

STOP STANDING YOURSELF UP

"At the start of the week or month, plot in your diary what time and date you're planning to be going to the gym, doing something active or even cooking your meals for the week," suggests Peter Williams, level three personal trainer and boxing instructor at PureGym. "Once you have these in your diary, make sure you're following your plan. You have effectively made a date with yourself and you don't want to stand yourself up. The more commitment to yourself and adherence to your plan for the week ahead is only going to lead to living a more consistent and healthy life."

HIT YOUR HRV SWITCH

If you're investing in a new sports watch or fitness tracker, be sure to opt for one that offers heart rate variability (HRV) among the other vast array of apps and functions. HRV measures the impact stress is having upon your body, and a growing number of elite athletes are developing their training routine based around this data. Scientists in Finland found that subjects who did high-intensity interval training (HIIT) when their HRV was high experienced greater fitness gains, while trials among cyclists in Spain using HRV training markers led to a 14 per cent increase in performance.



GET OFF THE SCALES

"Of course, we all want to see progress," says Williams, "and it is very tempting to get the idea in your head of 'in two weeks I can lose 5lbs', but instant gratification isn't something that comes with weight loss. I'd suggest ignoring the scales for a month at least and focus instead on following your healthy routine. Sure, scales can be a tool for motivation, but they can just as easily demoralise people and stop them from continuing their healthier life choices. At the end of the day, your health is for the rest of your life – not just an eight to 12-week health kick. Set yourself up for success, not failure."

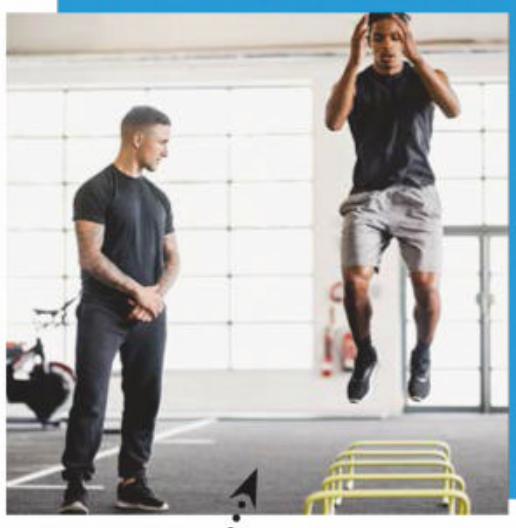
UP YOUR EFFORT LEVELS

If you're only getting the time to work out once or twice a week, make those sessions HIIT-based. They'll not just have the biggest impact on your training outcomes, but also on your VO2 max scores and even your life expectancy. A review of health data from 316,000 adults by the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences showed that for each millilitre increase in VO2 max (accrued from regular HIIT sessions) the risk of death from a cardiovascular event drops. No matter what the starting point was for those people studied, by boosting their VO2 max through HIIT they cut their risk of heart attack or similar trauma by up to nine per cent.

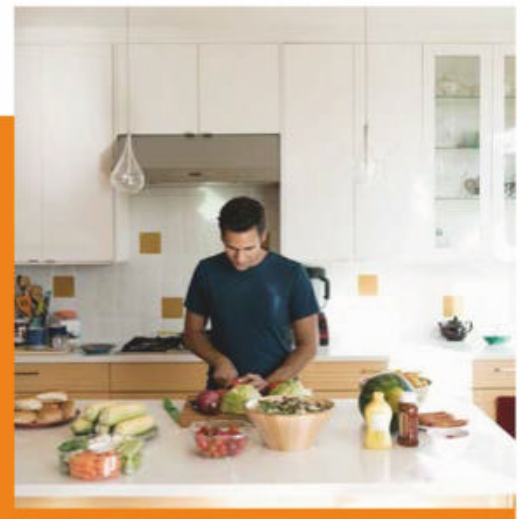
Words **Rob Kemp** Photography **Getty Images / Shutterstock**

INJECT SOME FUN INTO YOUR FITNESS

"There are some necessary evils when it comes to training, for example a few burpees at the end of a HIIT session may make you want to cry, but the feeling when they are completed is just fantastic," insists Williams. "Remember, though, the true optimal style of training is the one you enjoy – as that's the one you're most likely to stick to." Whether it's going to indoor cycling sessions, weight training with a PT or even going for brisk walks each day, there's an overwhelming body of evidence to show that if you're happy doing it, you are more likely to keep it up.



EXPERIMENT IN THE KITCHEN



Having fun should also transfer to the foods you are eating. Eating healthily can be misunderstood as being boring and repetitive, but a number of studies – reviewed by Harvard researchers – found that by making a resolution to seek out new recipes, different ideas and varieties to your meals, you can stay on track with a new eating routine and not lose the will to live. As taste buds adjust to new dishes, so the cravings for bad-habit junk foods diminish.

INNINGS

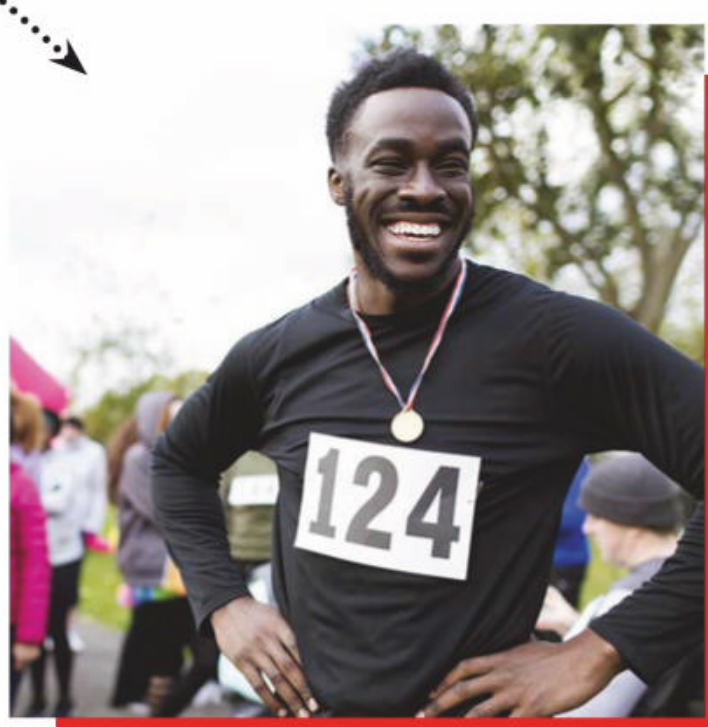
STEPS TO ENSURING 2020 IS YOUR FITTEST, HEALTHIEST YEAR YET

DON'T FORGET THE SMALL STUFF

"Setting yourself a big goal can seem daunting," says Williams. "So think about smaller, more achievable goals that will keep you motivated until you get where you want to be. It could start off as small as 'I will go to the gym today,' then progress to 'I will go to the gym three times this week.' The more you set yourself a goal and then achieve it, the more you are positively reinforcing your new healthier lifestyle. There will of course be times when you lose motivation and miss a session, or slip up nutrition-wise. If that happens, go right back to square one with small goals and gradually start to build them back up again."

PRIORITISE PROTEIN IN THE MORNING

Preloading with protein preloads your brain with dopamine, the chemical that powers your reward circuits, and researchers at the University of Missouri found that by eating a protein-packed breakfast trial subjects experienced fewer food cravings later in the day. To deliver enough protein to make the difference, try avocado on toast with cottage cheese (25g per serving) or a smoked salmon bagel (20g).



TAKE CONTROL

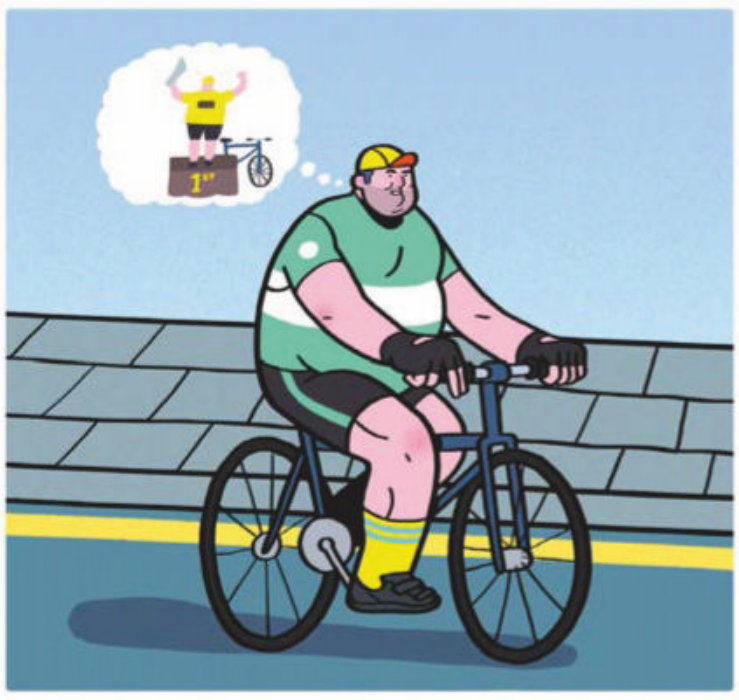
Do your training for your mind as much as for your body. "See that training can provide a level of consistency and balance to your life," says Williams. "In work and relationships, you can work really hard at something and it just might not happen for you. But when it comes to the gym, if you are consistent with your training and nutrition, you will definitely see some form of positive result. Whether it's weight loss, improved fitness or strength gain, you hold all the cards. Having an element of your life which is totally unbiased and controlled entirely by you will give you a sense of power and belief in what you can achieve this year and it must never be underestimated."

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

NEW YEAR, NEW DECADE, NEW YOU? IF TAKING CONTROL OF EITHER YOUR HEALTH, FITNESS, OR GENERAL SENSE OF WELLBEING IS TOP OF YOUR AGENDA IN THE MONTHS AHEAD, KEEP THESE POINTERS IN MIND – AND REMEMBER, REAL CHANGE IS A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT

SET REALISTIC GOALS

If it's improved fitness you're after, training for a summer race, competition or target number can be a powerful motivator, keeping you accountable and focused when negative thoughts creep in. But while aspiration is to be encouraged, the sky isn't the only limit you should take into account. Just as a twice-a-week cyclist would be advised to target a flat 30-mile race over getting their hands on the yellow jersey, your fitness resolutions should be grounded in a certain amount of realism.



FOCUS ON THE CONTROLLABLES

That said, even goals that seem a long shot – running an ultra-marathon, or dropping a couple of jeans sizes – are worth setting, as long as the only thing between you and success is your own commitment. If other factors could affect the outcome, have a re-think. For instance, while it might be tempting to make money and/or a promotion at work your central aims, both depend on the decisions of others. Focus instead on becoming more productive, or organised, and the rewards will probably follow.

ALLOW FOR SLIP-UPS

Long-term change is about the big picture. Achieving what you set out to achieve means an overall shift away from old habits, but along the way the odd setback is to be expected. If dropping some body fat is your aim, adopting a healthier approach to nutrition and possibly upping the intensity of your training will eventually lead to results, but occasional unhealthy choices aren't going to derail that. Embrace the midnight Big Mac, eat the cake, skip the gym – then get back on the wagon.

DON'T OVERHAUL EVERYTHING

Equally, taking a healthier approach to both nutrition and training doesn't have to mean setting up a fitness blog and creating your own unique collection of kale-based recipes. Again, considered, incremental and, crucially, achievable changes are better than sweeping overhauls that will eventually lead to frustration, burn-out and ultimately relapse. If you've resolved to make healthier food choices in the year ahead, that's great, but do so in a way that's sustainable and not a form of punishment.

Illustrations Dan Evans @danxdraws

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Lifting big is one thing, but cranking out heavy loads is a mark of your strength endurance. GB powerlifting champ and PerformancePro Coach Rob Rees takes you through a simple but effective way to work on yours

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"This is two circuits of three exercises, each one taking 15-25 minutes depending on how many rounds are done," says Rees. "Each circuit starts with a lower rep compound exercise, followed by a moderate rep hypertrophy exercise, then a higher rep conditioning/power endurance movement.

"Alternate week to week by increasing either load or number of rounds performed. It's a full-body programme aimed at developing strength endurance and work capacity."

CIRCUIT 1

4-6 rounds, 30-60 secs rest between exercises

- Romanian deadlift x 6-8 reps
- Incline dumbbell bench press x 10-12 reps
- Kneeling medicine ball slam x 12-15 reps

CIRCUIT 2

3-6 rounds, 30-60 secs rest between exercises

- Barbell bench press x 6-8 reps
- Rear foot elevated split squat x 10-12 reps
- Kettlebell swing x 12-15 reps

GRAND SLAM

Slam ball is a powerful core exercise that works your abs and lower back, as well as shoulders. By kneeling, you remove any momentum from your legs, meaning your core has to work double hard to generate force.

Be sure to use a specially designed slam ball and not a lighter medicine ball that's going to bounce up and bring your workout to a swift conclusion.

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